

Wormhole

Ganheim

Ratchet and Clank

Complete



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Wormhole

Ganheim

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Summary

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Description

Angela Cross thinks she has taken a quiet job in security, but when she discovers the truth behind Megacorp's latest contract, can she atone for what she was a part of?

1. Solona Breached

Disclaimer: Insomniac Studios owns the *Ratchet & Clank* license in whole, I am merely “borrowing it” for some of the loose threads it leaves and the opportunity to see a new story rise. Though I may not own Ratchet, Clank, Angela, or any other of the characters, I put my heart into this story and therefore I own the original elements, such as the Ta’ree.

Chapter 1: Solona Breached

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Solona, Deep Space in the Dagon Sector. 8 December, 16:14
Standard Time

...

A flash of light precedes a spherical burst. A spiral expands from the sphere’s equator and the wormhole stretches horizontally as it opens. The bright mouth opens and small chunks of various metal debris fly out. A small transport ship blasts out of the wormhole, its thrusters glowing brightly as its afterburners fizzle out. Small debris continues to fling out from the wormhole, and now ships pour through.

They are a motley assortment. Some are small, sleek cargo ships with graceful curves broken occasionally by scarring from a laser blast. Huge, blocky, lumbering cargo ships exit the wormhole and peel away to give the other ships more room as the blocky cargo ships’ ungainly engines push them away. Courier ships flash out of the bright mouth, the powerful engines propelling the small vessels, laser burns over many of the lightly armed ships. Haphazardly patched personnel transports at various levels of space worthiness fly from the wormhole, some of them leaking from minor hull breaches. Stout destroyers rumble from the open maw, their sturdy hulls badly scratched and pockmarked by battles.

As this ragtag fleet races through the wormhole, fighters scream out, lasers blasting. Some of the fighters are scratched and worn by battle and neglected of proper maintenance. These worn ones weave back and forth as they defend the refugee ships. The other fighters look almost straight out-of-the-factory fresh. They attack the battered refugee ships, occasionally returning fire on the defenders.

The communications officer holds her finger against her ear piece. She half-turns in her chair to tell the captain, "Captain, we are receiving multiple distress signals from the larger ships, including medical emergencies from the personnel transports." Her free hand continues to move across the keyboards. "No instructions from the *Phoenix*."

The *Phoenix*, the command ship, slowly crawls forward ahead of the *Falcon*. The large hangar door slides open. The fighters and scout ship within lift up and fly out of the hangar, spreading out to cover the area. The sensors officer squints at his main screen. His fingers play across the keyboards and the screen flickers. "Captain, several fighters have set an intercept course for the *Phoenix*, their weapons are armed."

As if to emphasize his point, one of the heavier fighters hits its afterburners and releases a spread of torpedoes towards the command ship, then slows to return to formation with the others. "The *Phoenix* has raised its shields and is arming weapons." The *Phoenix* increases speed and turns to one side to evade the torpedoes. The command ship alters its course to bring it towards the action.

The captain, who had been slouching slightly in his chair, changes his position to sit straight. "Bring us up on the *Phoenix*'s flank. Track those approaching fighters. Communications, ask if we should engage."

The comm officer turns back to her station. After a few seconds and several button-presses later, she half-turns back to the captain. "Captain Sasha sends orders to keep weapons powered down. She doesn't want to 'present the image of another hostile fleet moving in'."

The captain shrugs and the comm officer returns her attention to her station. A light blinks from one of the screens at the sensor officer's station. The captain turns towards it to see one of the screens set to a simple tactical display showing the *Falcon* missile cruiser, maintaining position a little behind *Phoenix*'s port side, with twelve yellow unknown fighters still approaching the command ship.

Keeping his eyes focused on his station, the sensors officer states, "Entering missile range. Unknown fighters still have their weapons locked on the *Phoenix*." A few seconds pass. The captain looks to the view screen to see the *Phoenix*'s missile tube open. A few missiles slide out, then light up as their thrusters activate, sending them just a little off of the fighters for a warning volley.

The fighters assume the missiles to be an attack, and take evasive

action. After dodging the missiles, they point back at the *Phoenix* and hit their afterburners.

The captain leans forward a little in his chair, leaning his elbows on the padded chair arms. “Communications, open an audio channel to the *Phoenix*.” A beep indicates that the microphone is on. “This is the *Falcon*, we have approaching hostiles on our screens. Do we have permission to engage?”

A heavy sigh from captain Sasha comes through the speakers. “No, we’re trying to get a peaceful—”

“With all due respect, it’s obvious that those fighters aren’t interested in establishing diplomatic repore.”

“I know that, *Falcon*. Let me take care of it.” The speakers click off. The *Falcon*’s captain looks to the view screen to notice that several of the fighters have released large, slow, white warheads at the *Phoenix*. The command ship accelerates towards the fighters and its turrets activate, slowly turning towards them.

The *Phoenix*’s missile tube, already open, starts to spit another round of missiles. Four of the enemy fighters turn towards the *Falcon*. “All right, battle stations. Shields and weapons.”

“Shields up, arming weapons.”

Three of the fighters approaching the *Falcon* fire large, white warheads like the seven already heading towards the *Phoenix*, though the thrusters on these rocket them at the missile cruiser. “Evasive!”

The pilot, straining to try to squeeze just a little more juice out of the engines, shouts back, “I can’t, they’re track—!”

The first warhead strikes the *Falcon*’s shields. It explodes in a huge, brilliant flash of white. The *Falcon* shakes violently and alarm klaxons screech through the bridge. Several panels explode and sparks shower from overloaded circuits. “Shields failing! Those are enhanced nukes!”

“Nukes are striking the *Phoenix*!”

“I can’t evade them!”

One of the nukes reaches a close enough proximity to the *Falcon* that it detonates. The pilot of the *Falcon* pushes the engines to full tilt, beyond the one-hundred percent the engines can sustain, and a groaning whine sounds in protest. While the maneuver manages to evade the primary fireball, the shock wave races towards the missile cruiser. It hits, causing the engines and main power to black out momentarily.

The ship shakes from the shock wave and momentarily loses control. The lights dim and several panels explode, sparks flying from overloaded circuits. The emergency lights come back on, bathing the bridge in an amber hue. “Hull breaches on decks three, four, and five!”

The speakers click as a message from the engine room route to the bridge. “This is engineering. We have a coolant leak we’re trying to get locked down. There’s also a crack in the first plasma coil pump, if we get hit again this entire ship is going to go poof in a bad way!”

Finally, the captain makes a decision. “Get us out of here! Activate the hyperjump module!”

The *Falcon* races away from the battle scene, still recovering from the second nuclear warhead as it desperately tries to avoid the third. Behind it, brilliant white flashes obscure the command ship *Phoenix* as the trundling nukes chasing after it hit their mark.

The glow of the *Falcon*’s engines dim as it slows, diverting energy into the hyperjump module. The next nuke heading towards it is about to contact with the engines when the *Falcon* speeds off into hyperspace.

...

Thank you all for reading my story. If you have any suggestions on how to make the scene more clear or vivid, if you have comments, or you’d just like to say something, please feel free to leave reviews.

2. Developments in Bogon

Minor spoiler warning concerning the end of “Going Commando”. It’s buried, so you might not even notice it unless you’ve finished GC.

...

Chapter 2: Developments in Bogon

...

...

Solana, Marcadia Orbit. 8 December, 17:56 Standard Time

...

In high orbit over the planet Marcadia, Valla stands at a window looking out into the yawning repair wing servicing the *Falcon*. The core of the station is a square with six spokes radiating out from it. Each of the spokes form the spine of a “wing”, with pylons extending down and around like ribs. The light brown, almost sand-colored exterior of the station contrasts with the rather stark but sleek and efficient gray of the missile cruiser *Falcon*.

The damaged ship rests nestled in the protective embrace of the repair wing. Huge sections of the hull armor have been removed, some having been fixed to the outside of the pylons to wait for repair work underneath, damaged ones being flown away via “workbees” to be recycled. Dozens of the paste-yellow colored workbees scurry over the docked *Falcon* in their crab-like side-to-side scuttle. The mass of small workers reminds Valla of ants swarming over sugar.

Valla is a Brigadier General of the Solana Galactic Rangers. A 45-year old human, rather short in height, he still holds a commanding presence with bright, piercing blue eyes. His back is ramrod straight and shoulders squared as if he was born that way and would forever remain at attention. His skin is pale from years in space and work indoors, never having relaxed in the light of a sun, and his short, well-trimmed brown hair is entirely hidden by his general’s hat. Valla keeps his weight balanced evenly on both feet as he looks out into the wing holding the *Falcon*.

Workbees pause, clamp onto a section of the hull, and sparks fly as they set their torches to work cutting away damage and welding in fresh replacement parts. Fortunately, the captain of the *Falcon* got the

ship out of danger before it could take too much serious damage from the enhanced nuclear weapons sent against it. Now workbees cart around huge sections of the ship, exposing the massive engines for direct repairs.

While the *Falcon* survived, the situation is critical. The entire Dagon sector has been set into lockdown, full quarantine in place. While the wormhole remains a classified secret, the Galactic President ordered a press release on the events, and the Solana Galaxy is stunned with the loss of the *Phoenix*. The Q-Force was on board. Though the troops generally don't mourn Qwark, the loss of Captain Sasha will hit many people hard. Valla shakes his head. She was supposed to receive a promotion to Major tomorrow, he was going to be the presenting officer.

A hiss as the doors to Valla's office open return his attention to the present, and more specifically to his office. As he gazes into the window, Valla can see the reflection of a private, probably a messenger as he enters. Valla continues to stare out the tall window, watching as workbee pods scuttle back and forth over the *Falcon*. The private glances at Valla and snaps at attention next to the door with a click of the heels, patiently waiting. He must not have been explicitly ordered to give whatever message he carried right away.

Valla clasps his hands behind his back, and without a single tone in his voice to betray whatever emotions beneath the surface, he begins. "Go ahead, private. It looks like we may have a galactic crisis on our hands. Don't keep me waiting."

The private, dressed in a spotless Galactic Ranger uniform, clicks his heels together and salutes before he speaks. "Sir! The message of the disaster has been transmitted throughout the Galactic Rangers." The private pauses to breathe, hesitant to continue. "There is, um... one problem."

Valla's eyebrow rises, but he remains facing the window. He clasps his hands behind his back. "Which would be...?"

"We can't contact Ratchet. The message has been sent to Veldin. We even tried asking one of the locals to get the message to him, but apparently Ratchet has gone off in his ship."

Valla rolls his eyes, assuming some administrator to be at fault for the lack of thought. *Stupid bureaucrats*. "Then send a signal to his fighter. The transceiver will pick it up."

"Well, sir, they would have. He's not in the ship the Galactic Rangers gave him." The private stops, tapping his chin as he thinks.

“Do you remember the report about when he went to the Bogon Galaxy?”

Valla now turns around one hundred eighty degrees with a drilled military precision. He looks the private in the eye as he asks, “What does this have to do with Megacorp?”

The private begins to spread his hands in the classic gesture of surrender, but snaps back to attention midway through the gesture. “We expected him to ditch his old one, but Ratchet left in the Manta-class star-fighter Megacorp gave him. Nobody has any idea where he is. Clank was reached, but all he knows is that Ratchet is on a quiet vacation somewhere. As for his Megacorp star-fighter, we... don’t have the transceiver frequency.”

Valla sighs. He closes his eyes and thinks, drawing in another breath as he wonders why it seems they always leave him to give the bad news. His mind circles about, then strikes an idea when he recalls Megacorp. “Very well, private. Dismissed.” The private salutes Valla and the officer returns the gesture. The private drops his salute and spins around with a click of the heels, then marches out.

Valla walks to his desk and spins his chair around to plop into it. He straitens out and picks up a pad, sorting through information until he finds the report labeled “Cross”. Valla faces the computer and clicks it on, then opens a channel to the local command center. A tanned, dark woman reading a book in Tyrranese sits at the desk of the call destination. She glances out of her eye to see the general on her screen. With one motion, she slaps the book shut, drops it on the desk to the side, and turns to face the camera, the expression on her face like a school child who has been caught breaking the rules. “Hello, general. Do you need me to route your call to a specific location off-site, or did you want to speak to someone in the Alhailen facility?”

“I’m going to need you to dig up an old comm channel. I know that you read the report about Ratchet and Clank in the Bogon Galaxy, their run-in with Megacorp . . .” The woman nods. ‘I need you to get me in touch with that geneticist . . .’ Valla looks at the report on his desk, “. . . miss Cross.”

The woman nods and adjusts her ear piece. After a few moments of clicking, she looks back at the camera. “I think I have it, sir. It’s buried in the archives. Let me pull it up.” Another few clicks later. “I have the Megacorp executive offices. Do you want me to patch you through?”

“That should do.”

The woman nods and her hands move over a few controls out of view below the screen. A second passes and the screen flickers, blinking black for a moment. It flickers again, a blue background with the Megacorp logo dominating the center. A pre-recorded advertiser voice begins, “Here at Megacorp, we’re always at work—”

Valla rolls his eyes, but before the recorded message can bore him further, the Megacorp logo is replaced with Mr. Fizzwidget. “Hello, this is Ambercrombie Fizzwidget. How can I help you . . .” Fizzwidget squints at the screen, trying to find a name card on Valla’s uniform that isn’t there, “. . . good folks at the Solana Galactic Rangers? Have we decided to update that contract with armor technology exchange yet?”

Keeping his expression straight and his voice dead serious, Valla clearly states, “This is not a contract negotiation, mister Fizzwidget. One of our exploration fleets was attacked by a wing of your Megacorp star-fighters.”

Valla pauses to draw in a breath, as if to make a point about how serious the message is, but Fizzwidget takes it as a cue that the general has stopped talking and it is now his turn. “My word! That’s horrible!” He stops and looks up, stroking his chin. “Granted, we are a company that makes military hardware, and we’ve had plenty of business with several groups—”

“Mister Fizzwidget! That is not the point. The precise location of the attack is classified, and I’m afraid that I can’t tell you anything about the specifics. We wanted to contact one of our temp operatives, Ratchet. The problem is, he’s gone and he’s in the star-fighter your company gave him.”

Fizzwidget rolls his eyes upward and rubs his chin as he remembers Ratchet. “Ah, yes, I recall him. Adorable little fellow, mighty handy with that wrench of his, and a fine shot—”

“Chairman Fizzwidget, if I may. We wish to contact Ratchet, and according to my report,” Valla looks back down at the data pad in his hands to double-check the data, Angela Cross’s picture and information centered on the pad’s screen, “A geneticist of yours by the name of Cross should be able to help us.”

“Ah, yes. A dependable, hard worker. I believe she’s been promoted since then, I’ll see if I can get you her comm number.” Fizzwidget chuckles good-naturedly. “That is, if she’s in her office. She’s been busy day in and day out with field work since she got back. I’ll have to

put you on hold for a minute.”

Valla nods and Fizzwidget reaches below the visible screen to push a button. The Megacorp logo appears and some cheesy elevator music begins playing. Valla rolls his eyes and clicks a button to mute the computer, then reaches beside the computer to his small stereo. He taps the play button and the built-in display screen lights up. “Frank Klepacki . . . Tiberian Sun . . . 21 Infiltration.” The speakers begin to pulse with music. The general quietly releases a long exhale, wishing he had a few more outlets to relax once in a while.

The Megacorp logo disappears, replaced by a female lombax in a set of armor, a Megacorp security uniform. Valla unmutes the transmission and pauses the stereo. “—is Angela Cross, Megacorp security. I have a fleet assignment, I was just about to get going.”

“Brigadier General Valla of the Solana Galactic Rangers. I have a report here about your work with Sergeant Ratchet in the Bogon Galaxy.”

“That was . . . a number of months ago. A little slow on the uptake?” Angela’s eyebrow rises for a moment and she smirks at her joke on the general.

Valla frowns. “According to my report, you two worked together against Qwark. Anyway, Ratchet was given a Megacorp star-fighter.”

Angela crosses her arms. “You’d have to call the space vehicle division. I work in security, used to work in xenogenetics before Megacorp got that new deal. If you want a contract—”

“I’m not here to order a damn star-fighter, we’ve got plenty of our own! Ratchet buggered off on some stupid ‘finding himself’ vacation, and he took the fighter Megacorp gave him. One of our fleets was attacked, and we wanted to inform him of the casualties and call him back out of retirement. We don’t have the transceiver frequency to contact him.”

Angela lets her hands drop to her sides and her eyebrow goes up again. “Well, I’d like to help you, but I work in security right now. I’m afraid that I’ve been busy on Marshall duty for a while. You should be able to find out that information by contacting someone in executive administration. Mister Fizzwidget seems to be free today, you should be able to get him.”

Valla admits, “I just talked with him.”

Now Angela’s eyebrow rises higher. “And you didn’t ask him?”

“Well . . . the report says you worked with Ratchet. I assumed that you would . . .”

Angela smiles and shakes her head. “You need to update your files more often in the Solana Galaxy. Short of personally coming to Solana and searching for him, I don’t think there’s anything I can do.” She shrugs her shoulders. “Sorry.”

“Hmm, very well. Patch me back into Fizzwidget’s office if you can.”

Angela nods and reaches towards a button just off the side of the screen. The transmission cuts and the Megacorp logo appears again. The cheesy elevator music begins to play again, but before Valla can shut it off, Fizzwidget’s face appears on the screen. “Well, my good man, I hope that my security chief was able to help you.”

“I have a request, Chairman Fizzwidget. Ratchet seems to have disappeared in one of your Megacorp star-fighters. We need to get the transceiver frequency so we can contact him.”

...

Bogon, Ratatosk system in the Igdrasil Sector. 9 December, 13:10
Standard Time

...

“Man, this is so much more boring than xenogenetics. I miss the days when I was busy twenty hours a day chasing down smugglers.” Angela sits in a tall chair in front of a cluster of monitors, each displaying the feed from a camera in one of the ships in the fleet being delivered to the Ta’ree. The monitors blink from one camera to another and Angela slouches, crossing her arms and letting her eyelids droop in boredom.

One of the monitors blinks to ‘camera 32’ and Angela thinks she sees the outline of a moving figure. She bolts upright and hits a key to return the view to camera 32.

Nothing.

She pans the camera around and still sees nothing. Then the open button on a keypad next to a door mysteriously turns green and the door opens. She notices a distortion in the air move through the door. She reaches to her shoulder and clicks on her radio. “Units three and four, head to weapon storage room eight. There is an invisible intruder. Repeat: *invisible* intruder. Proceed with utmost caution.” Angela stands up and sprints to the section, motioning another

watchman to her chair.

Two groups of four Megacorp security personnel arrive at the door, taking up positions on both sides of it. Pressed against each side of the door, another two guards slide warily in front of the doorway, Lancers up and pointed into the storage room.

A small sound like a cross between a click and a beep reaches their ears and a faint red light blinks from behind some crates deep in the storage room. The two to the side nod to the two standing in front of the door. One takes position with the others beside the door. The other puts away his Lancer and reaches into a pocket on his waist. He withdraws a cylindrical canister and presses his thumb onto a button on the end. It blinks red once and goes dark again. He throws it into the room like a grenade and dives to the side.

All of the security personnel look away and squeeze their eyes shut. A bright flash and loud bang that lightly shakes the hall blasts from the room.

Angela rounds a corner, still running. She rips her radio from its clip on her shoulder. "Cross to control, shut down the section! Shut down all electrical systems!" She slaps the radio back on her shoulder and draws what looks like an ordinary fragmentary grenade with blue stripes on the side. She glances at the other officers and continues running towards the door. She clicks a switch on the grenade and throws it into the storage room. The lights go off and a bright, blue sphere bursts from the grenade, enveloping the room in the EMP grenade's detonation.

The teams turn on lights on their wrists, holding up their weapons. Angela motions forward and team three, on the left side of the door, moves in with Lancers up and flashlights held alongside the barrels. She follows as they step cautiously into the crate-filled room, flashlights moving up and down as they sweep the room. Another security team arrives and team four steps in, drawing Lancers and holding their lights alongside the barrels and walking with the same practiced caution, closing the door behind them.

Angela hears the sound of boots scratching across the top of the crates and she jerks her Lancer towards the sound, followed by three other guards. Nothing.

Slowly and suspiciously, they lower their weapons and resume their sweep of the room. Angela hears a click and she swings her Lancer back up towards the sound, right next to the crate where they heard the scratching of boots. A small ball-shaped object reminding her of

one of Ratchet's bomb glove explosives descends towards a small cluster of three guards.

"Grenade!" Angela jumps and dives behind a crate. She narrowly makes it behind the crate before it explodes, sending three cries of injury into the air. A pair of guards raise their Lancers and start firing at the no-longer cloaked but still very slippery intruder. Angela pops up and hops over the crate.

The intruder is a male lombax, a few inches shorter than her. His fur is more of a dark beige than the regular tan-orange of most lombaxes, and the brown stripes are longer, more like the silhouette-breaking patterns on a tiger. His bright, alert eyes are a burning violet, and he wears a graceful, form-fitting armor Angela has never seen before. The lombax draws a whip and races towards the three guards blocking the door. All three are firing at him, but he is dodging admirably and his armor seems to be taking what few blows hit.

Angela draws her latest gift from Megacorp: a 'plasma sword'. She clicks it on, charging the blade with a bright plasma aura and sprints at the intruder. The intruder takes a swing and his whip slices into the least-armored guard at the door, removing the guard's arm. The guard drops his weapon and jumps back screaming. The intruder jumps to the side, using the doorway to shield him from the Megacorp guards.

Angela continues sprinting at the intruder. He raises his whip and swings at her, but she blocks with her sword and continues to close. The intruder backs up and hits a stack of crates. Now in a corner, he has nowhere to run.

Angela brings up her sword and slashes it down and across her opponent. He responds by trying to use his whip again, but Angela is so close that she easily blocks. She slashes again and the intruder drops down in a crouch. She draws back with her sword to swing again when her opponent pulls a surprising move. He launches himself at her, his helmet striking her solidly in her stomach, knocking the wind out of her and forcing her back.

She stumbles a bit but catches herself, gasping for breath. The lombax brings his whip up again and swings it at guards from the first two teams coming at him from the back of the room. These guards let their armor absorb the blow and continue rushing him. He turns back towards the entrance and the lights turn back on.

Angela shouts into her radio at the same moment that two guards body-slam the lombax into a stack of crates, causing some to tumble down and hit the floor with a crash. Angela is unsure of whether she

was heard for a moment, then hears a hiss from the air vents. Before the lombax sleeping gas can effect her, she reaches to the side of her helmet and pulls the rebreather on, clicking it into place.

The intruder wrestles with the two guards with a surprising strength either borne out of desperation, adrenaline, hidden enhancements in the armor, or all of the above. He fights with a speed and dexterity she hasn't seen since she fought against Ratchet, masquerading as the masked thief. Angela silently counts to herself, and reaches thirty seconds before the lombax throws off one of the guards attempting to pin him down, somersaulting over the next and breaking his arm. Angela's eyes narrow as she looks at the lombax, *The gas should be affecting him by now, why isn't he falling asleep?*

The lombax's strength is slowly diminishing, but not nearly as fast as he should be since the vents are still hissing as they discharge lombax sleeping gas, a fog starting to collect near the floor. She does have to admit, she's impressed with the ferocious agility he displays. He throws off another and makes a break for the door, getting about three steps before another guard blocks his path and he kicks off the guard's chest-plate. The door is closed to help seal in the sleeping gas and prevent the intruder's escape, and the fog grows thicker and higher.

The lombax delivers a crunching upward kick to a guard's jaw, he uses the momentum to vault over another guard and run towards the door. He pulls some sort of hacking kit from a pocket on his belt and jams a keycard into the reader beside the door. The keycard connects to a separate keypad by a ribbon cable, and he starts desperately punching in commands.

Angela doesn't wait for him to open the door. She draws her sword again and clicks it on. She runs at him with the charged blade held high. The lombax looks up at her and drops the lock hack, letting it bounce against the wall as he faces Cross. He draws his whip and swings at her, though more slowly than before. She blocks with her sword and turns her body sideways, slamming her shoulder into the mystery lombax.

He hits the door hard but recovers quickly. He brings up his whip and swings clumsily, only managing to strike Angela by already being so close. His eyes hold a fading look of desperation, slowly being replaced by a thoughtless sleepiness, his eyelids visibly growing heavy. He forces his eyes open and puts away the whip, then draws a small remote from his belt. He presses his finger down on the button and Angela can see the button glow. In a lightly slurred voice, he says,

“Dead-man thwith. Clean the air ol I blow thith thip.”

Angela looks at his eyes to see an indomitable determination, to the thumb pressing down on the button in what is most likely a real dead-man’s switch. She looks back into his eyes and sighs. Reluctantly, she states into her radio, “Angela to command, flush the air. Repeat: I need an emergency cleaning of the air in weapons storage eight.”

The hissing from the vents stop, then a loud whistling sound whips about the room as vents around the floor open and suck out the gas-filled air. Vents from the top of the room blast clean air into the room and within a minute it has been cleared.

The lombax turns back to the lock hack and puts out his left hand against the wall to steady himself. He blinks and shakes his head. After looking at the hack for a moment, he turns back to Angela. “Open dawl.”

“Command, unlock and open the door to weapons storage eight.”

A loud hiss and series of clicks echo from the machinery in the walls, then the thick door slides open. The mysterious lombax turns back to Angela and motions for her to start moving first. “Nearetht thuttle pod.”

“Still suffering after-effects of the sleeping gas?”

“Thut up.”

Angela smiles to herself and begins walking towards the nearest airlock connecting to a shuttle pod. She glances over her shoulder to the lombax. “Planning on trying to blow the ship and escape?”

“No,” *I’m giving my partners time to escape.* Angela glances over her shoulder at him with one eyebrow raised. “None of your bithneth. Now markth.”

Angela and the lombax walk for a few minutes, with Angela peeking over her shoulder often. Just before they reach the airlock, the lombax holds his left hand to the side of his helmet, as if listening to a radio transmission that only he can hear. They reach the airlock and the lombax still has his hand against his helmet. “No, continue your mithon. I’ve been compromised.... I’ve got a dead manth thwith.” The lombax listens for a second. “Don’t argue with me. Keep out of trouble, don’t rithk yourthelf on a thuithide rethcue.”

Angela carefully listens. *So, he has an accomplice.* She lowers her gaze to the floor.

Her attention returns to the mysterious lombax when he steps

forward and presses a button to open the airlock, the small shuttle pod just beyond the door. Angela motions to step inside, but the lombax blocks her, a strange look of recognition flashing through his violet eyes. “No. You don’t have to die too. Thith dead manth thwitch ithn’t jutht a detonator to other bombth. It containth an ekthplothive.”

Angela looks at the lombax, wondering why he would say that he would sacrifice himself. He rolls his eyes and explains, “I can’t let my technology fall into the handth of the Ta’ree.” He begins to step inside the pod and catches a twitch from Angela. He turns back to the security chief. “Don’t try to thtop me. The detonator containth a finger thcanner, it would ekthplode if you tried to knock me out and hold the button.”

A light bulb goes on in Angela’s mind and she narrows her eyes in anticipation as the lombax turns to the shuttlepod. He steps towards one of the seats and she draws a canister of lombax sleeping gas. *He’s still suffering the effects, it shouldn’t take more than a minute to knock him out this time.* Still wearing the rebreather, Angela clicks open the canister and throws it into the pod, jumping in after it just as the doors close narrowly behind her boots.

The lombax looks at her with wide eyes, trying desperately to back away from her. She clamps one hand over his on the remote, forcing his thumb to remain compressed on the detonator. With her other hand she fends off his other arm and grabs his head, trying to bash it against the control panel to knock him out faster.

Fortunately, she was right about the effect of the gas on him. He is still suffering the effects, and though she’s certain that whatever armor she has includes servos or something to enhance his strength, he is rather weak. Fog starts to collect on the floor, thickening and rising as lombax sleeping gas fills the compact space of the shuttle pod. He struggles valiantly, thrashing against Angela and trying to free his hand from the detonator, though she notices a look of regret in his eyes. A minute passes and though his strength is ebbing away, he still fights with remarkable skill. Angela and the lombax struggle through another minute, but finally his heavy eyelids slip shut, his weak thrashing finally stops as his body goes limp.

“Angela to command! I have the infiltrator! Get a security and medical team down here right away!” She looks at the fog filling the shuttle pod. “Make sure any lombaxes coming have rebreathers equipped. And bring tape, I can’t hold his finger on the detonator forever.”

Again, please comment on anything. Feedback helps enormously. So does praise :).

You may notice that Valla doesn't have an easy time contacting Ratchet. This is because I decided that the Rangers would give Ratchet a "proper Solana fighter" to replace his Megacorp one; it's a gift for saving Solana from Nefarious. As for why they don't still have the comm freq for the Megacorp one, chalk that one up to bureaucratic idiocy and record-keeping . . . and believe me, it actually does happen.

3. Sickbay

Chapter 3: Sickbay

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Bogon, Ratatosk System in the Igdrasil Sector. 9 December, 17:04
Standard Time

...

“Nngggg...” A drowsy lombax slowly forces his eyes open. The effort is strenuous, like lifting huge blocks of lead. A bright, white light shines in his face. The lombax snaps his eyes shut and tries to turn away, only to find that his head is firmly held in place by padded restraints. He struggles to move his arms and legs to find that his entire body, even his tail is similarly restrained.

“Jack! He’s awake! It’s incredible! With such a high dose of lombax sleeping gas, and he’s already becoming conscious.”

I wouldn’t quite say that I’m conscious yet, more like in a forced, drunken stupor. The lombax tries to move his head again, but it is held in place and restrained from moving in any direction. He tries to complain, spit out some bitter slander against the Ta’ree, but only manages to slur, “Ennnangggggg...”

The light seems to diminish and the lombax risks opening his eyes. A nearby lamp now shines on his right arm and he sees two blurry figures leaning over him, one setting down a radio. He notices one speak, the human was the one who said he was conscious. He speaks with an absolute glee, like a school child who has found a new life treasure in the playground. “Isn’t it amazing doctor? Look at this! His muscles are already tensing, even with all of the sedatives!”

I’m not tensing for your entertainment, Ta’ree fool! I’m trying to escape! The lombax pushes against the restraints to find that he is stretched out, his body and legs locked in a standing position and his arms straight out to the sides. Straps hold his tail in place between his legs so he can’t even swish it angrily. Then he notices something that makes his eyes snap wide open. His armor is gone. He growls, and the proper sound finally comes out suitably threatening.

A new voice speaks, “Well, it looks like he’s still got plenty of vigor.” The owner of the voice, the second doctor, kneels down next to

the lombax on his right side. He pokes at the fur between his ear and the base of his jaw. "This looks like a residual scar from cranial surgery. Mind telling us what you had work on?"

Nanobot implants. The lombax grits his teeth and decides to keep his mouth closed rather than spit out an insult.

"Come on, buddy. I know you can talk. Your EEG is too active for you to be fully sedated."

The lombax growls.

"Fine then." The human directs his attention to the first human. 'Let's finish the overview.' The human stands straight and the lombax notices he holds a thick clipboard and a pen. He holds a pen over the paper, moving it down and stopping at a point near the bottom of the page. The human begins circling the lombax with a bored expression on his face, as if he had been doing this for a while. "X-rays showed nothing 'shadows' on the skeleton." He pauses to look up at the other doctor, who is unclipping a scanner from an equipment table on the lombax's right. "You said that you found something odd in his wrists?"

"Yes, Doctor Kev'." The doctor moves a scanner emitting a blue light down the arm to the lombax's wrist.

Doctor 'Jack Kev' stands there, holding his clipboard and tapping his pen against it absent-mindedly as he looks at the display screen the scanner is hooked into. "Well, that's interesting. I wonder how he can still move his fingers."

Unstrap me and I'll show you how I can still move my fingers. The lombax settles on a growl, causing the doctor holding the scanner to pause and look at the lombax's face with a slightly worried expression, but the other ignores the noise.

Doctor Kev' finishes his last note and steps back, then motions to the other doctor before he walks away. The other doctor shuts off the corded tool to its stand nearby, just out of the lombax's view, then wheels it to the side. "We're all done, miss Cross."

Angela steps in front of the table and motions to the doctor. He taps a button on the corner and the table rotates, stopping with the lombax's feet near the floor so he could appear to be standing. The lombax immediately remembers her as the one who wrestled him down in the shuttle pod. His face twists in fury as he snarls, "*You*. Do you have *any* idea what you've done?"

"I stopped a saboteur who appeared to be ready to blow up himself and the whole rest of the fleet. Perhaps you'd like to explain how you

managed to sneak onto the cargo freighter, and what you were doing there?”

The lombax averts his eyes, but with the restraints keeping him from moving at all, he can still clearly see her standing there, staring at him from his peripheral vision. The lombax flexes his fingers and toes. Without the intention of changing the subject, he mentions, “I see that we are both still here. I assume that means you found a way to disarm it?”

She narrows her eyes, but decides to answer. “We tried. We worked next to an airlock, and the detonator blew up your planted charges before it exploded, so we had about a second and a half to chuck it out the airlock.” Angela crosses her arms. “Eighteen people were killed when your charges blew up, and at least four ships were destroyed.”

The lombax mutters darkly to himself, “Damn it. Third party casualties are against the rules of engagement.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What did you think you were doing by shipping weapons and ships to a wormhole? You’re supplying a war. And my—our people are on the failing side.”

4. The Saboteur's Identity

Chapter 4: The Saboteur's Identity

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Bogon, Ratatosk system in the Igdrasil Sector. 9 December, 17:19
Standard Time

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Angela sits at a desk, looking at a computer screen with Ambercombe Fizzwidget. He listens intently as she finishes, “. . . I am certain he was truthful about his desire to keep the technology in his suit from the Ta’ree. He was willing to sacrifice himself to destroy it, but he didn’t want to kill me. If he did, he would have released the detonator and blown us all up.”

“Hmm . . . very well. Since you insist, I’ll grant you authorization to hide his technology from the Ta’ree. Maybe our tech department could have a look at it.” Angela shoots a condescending glare at Fizzwidget, and he shrugs his shoulders. “But what do you suggest we do about the saboteur? The Ta’ree are bound to ask why four of their ships and so much of their equipment were destroyed. I’d prefer not to have to blatantly lie to them.”

Angela rubs her arm, thinking. “I’m not sure what to tell them. Or perhaps we could leave it at a saboteur, and state that we captured him. It would leave him in our jurisdiction.” Before the conversation can continue, a timer on the computer begins beeping. Angela rolls her eyes. “Oh, yeah. I’m scheduled to interrogate him at 17:25.”

Fizzwidget thinks, furrowing his eyebrows. “Aren’t there already security personnel there who can take care of it?”

“In normal circumstances, yes. Unfortunately, the doctors say he’s resistant to every drug he’s been given, and he’ll only talk to me. I don’t know why yet.”

Fizzwidget shrugs and shuts off the transmission. Angela clicks off the computer and stands up from the cubicle. She makes her way to the temporary brig — a small set of crew quarters, cleared out by other security personnel. She stops at the door and nods to the pair of guards. One turns around and enters a combination to open the door. It slides open and Angela walks in, nodding to the two guards inside.

They nod back and one walks to the far door leading to what would normally be the bedroom; in this case the prisoner's cell.

The guard opens the door and steps back. Angela walks into the cleared bedroom. Everything has been removed: decorations, furniture — the only sign they were there are bolt holes in the floor for the furniture. The lombax prisoner is dressed in a basic Megacorp jumpsuit since there were no prisoner uniforms and Angela didn't want to risk finding out that he had weaponry or some unpleasant gadget hidden in his own clothing.

The lombax currently lies on his side on the floor, back against the wall, curled up in sleep. His chest rises and falls rhythmically as he draws in deep breaths, then expels the air with a silent ruffle of the fur around his mouth. Now that he's not wearing his armor, she can get a better look at his features. The fur seems to be a uniform brown-off-orange like she thought earlier, but the stripes that she only saw on the cheeks appear to continue on his drooped ears and it indeed gives him a semblance to a tiger.

Angela steps into the room and notices an odd flick of the prisoner's ears before the door closes behind her. She stands next to the door and crosses her arms in front of her chest, noting that every time she finds him, he seems to be sleeping. "Don't you ever get sleep back home?"

"You could say I move around a lot."

Angela's eyes widen momentarily from surprise and her arms snap to her sides, but she quickly pulls herself back together and hides her expression behind a mask of indifference.

The lombax opens his mouth in a wide but silent yawn. He rolls over onto his knees and once on all fours, stretches in a manner that looks very much like a cat to Angela. After stretching, he stands up and looks at her but doesn't make eye contact, keeping his violet eyes downcast.

"The guards tell me that you're completely silent around them. Why is it that you talk to me?"

The corners of the prisoner's mouth turn up, though Angela isn't certain that he is smiling. "You really don't know?" Angela stands steady, not a muscle moves, so the prisoner continues. 'You're the one who defeated me.' He makes a half turn away and looks down as his shoulders droop a little. "Even at the risk of your own life."

"What's your name?"

The lombax smiles and remains at profile to Angela. "Trying to fill in blanks on your paperwork when you hand me over to the Ta'ree like refuse?"

Angela raises her right eyebrow at the rather oddly-worded statement. "I know you have a name. I heard your partner call you something over your helmet transceiver." The lombax jerks away at the mention of his accomplices. He sits down on the floor, cross-legged, then closes his eyes. Angela sighs, having hoped to make some progress in this interrogation. "Come on. We're not going to hand you over to the Ta'ree."

The prisoner's eyes pop open and his gaze flit towards Angela, wondering if she speaks the truth. She hasn't lied to him yet, and though most people give him a hostile, isolating sensation, he doesn't sense any of that from Cross. He looks forward again, Angela assumes to avoid eye contact. "My father named me... Rusko. He told me it meant 'cunning and agile as the fox'."

"I'm Angela Cross. I... actually have no idea what it means."

Rusko glances at Angela in surprise. He breathes in and out once, forcing himself to relax. After a moment of collecting himself, he walks to the far wall and leans against it, trying to look casual.

"What were you doing on the freighter?" Angela crosses her arms again and looks over the prisoner, as if her piercing gaze could reveal some of his secrets.

Rusko snaps with an intensity in his voice just below a shout, "What did you think I was doing? I was planting explosive charges on the weapons you were shipping to the Ta'ree." He takes a step away from the wall and crosses his arms behind his back, holding his elbows in his palms, then begins to pace. 'We were at a deadlock in the war, but our... recruitment was about to bolster our ranks. It's a long and drawn out war, but at least my people would have had peace.' He looks to Angela, not quite succeeding in with-holding a glare as his eyes lock onto the Megacorp logo on her armor uniform. "Then suddenly they acquired an influx of ships and technology."

Rusko blinks at Angela and forces himself to look away from the Megacorp logo. He stomps towards her and she tenses. He brings up his hand and holds his index finger and thumb less than an inch apart. "We were this close to finally . . . making a difference." He turns away and walks back to the far wall to begin pacing again. His eyes dart about and he remembers the day he narrowly escaped being caught himself.

Rusko sat, looking out the window of an apartment in a high-rise building. Shouts rose up from the increasingly packed streets below as the police rounded up thousands of people. He looked out of the window with a set of binoculars in his hand. The police had their usual “zap prods”, but now there were dozens and dozens of red and white robots with them. Using the binoculars, he took a closer look at the robots. They were very humanoid, armed with some sort of rifles in each hand. Stamped on the back of the heads he noticed a strange symbol he would later learn was the Megacorp logo.

A buzzing from the front door makes him jump. He hears a knocking and the police on the other side shout, “Open up in there!”

Angela looks over the prisoner, thinking she’s hearing a hint of the pounded-out memorized story in what he says. “So, I’m guessing that you’re going to tell me that all Ta’ree are evil?”

Rusko’s attention snaps to the voice that interrupted his secret memory. “All people who are not Ta’ree are their enemies.” *With the possible exception of humans.* “They may tolerate humans, but everyone else is their enemy.’ Rusko steps back to eye Angela, and she gets the disturbing sensation that he’s sizing her up, the same way a lion does stragglers of a herd of gazelle. “Especially us. If you don’t believe me, just show up to meet the proconsul they’ll be sending to inspect the delivery.”

“Fine. Maybe I’ll go do that.” She turns towards the door and begins walking out.

Rusko wasn’t expecting her to acquiesce so easily, he expected her to ignore everything he said about the Ta’ree. Of course, she had every reason to be suspicious. He was a prisoner, trying to blow up shipments to the Ta’ree. Before Angela steps out the door, he gets her attention, “Wait!” She pauses, one foot inside the doorway and one foot outside, half-turned to look at him. “Be careful. He could try to kill you on sight.”

5. Tides of Darkness

Chapter 5: Tides of Darkness

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Solona, Marcadia Orbit. 9 December, 18:32 Standard Time

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Lights blink all over the command center in the station command center. Large map screens over the walls display the Solona Galaxy. Systems show up as dots, many of them colored with the contested “red”, some with undulating red circles to indicate serious hot spots. At every station, personnel are scrambling to keep up with the unstable situation.

The main double-door entrance slides open and general Valla walks in. He pauses at the stairs to look around the hectic room. After a moment of surveying, he calmly walks down the steps towards the large map table at the center of the room. Several officers already sit around it, pointing and muttering about the situation to each other. Valla nears and a 2nd Lieutenant sees him and snaps to attention, hand up in a salute. “General on the command deck!”

Valla quickly returns the salute. “At ease. What do we have here, gentlemen?”

A tall lombax, slightly taller than general Valla and wearing a spotless Colonel’s uniform, points to a grouping of flashing red planets on the map. “We’ve got a helluva mess on our hands, and it’s only getting worse. The Tyrranoids have been a constant problem ever since Nefarious, even after Ratchet mowed through. The announcement of the destruction of the *Phoenix*, as requested by the President, only made things worse. They must have figured out that the Q-Force was still on board and were killed, and that a lot of the Galactic Rangers’ commanders went with. Uprisings rose in nearly every Tyrranese system that wasn’t already in chaos. There wasn’t much chance of containing news of such widespread riots in the first place, but once the Blargians got wind of the problem they’ve followed suit. We’re spread so thin that we’ve had to activate all our reserves and call people out of retirement.”

General Valla takes his seat and looks over the map table. He nods in understanding of the gravity of the situation. “Damn it. And we still

haven't managed to contact Ratchet yet. What about the President?"

The lombax Colonel sucks in his breath and looks around, hoping somebody else will answer. Nobody does. "I don't think we can rely on the President, sir. He's been... irrational and secluded since we sent a messenger to inform him that Sasha was declared K-I-A. I've gone over the debriefings from the captain of the *Falcon* again, but I can't find anything useful in it." The Colonel holds up an e-pad containing said debriefing.

"Speaking of that, how's the quarantine in the Dagon Sector?"

One of the pulsating-red-circle systems blinks, then reduces to a simple red dot to indicate that the system status has been reduced to contested. Several of the staff around the table breathe a sigh of relief. The Colonel answers general Valla's question, "With the Blargians stirring up trouble, we've had to divert ships. We've barely got enough there to call it a lock-down, general. We haven't seen any other signs of hostility, the 'refugee' fleet scattered without a trace after the *Falcon* fled, and several advisors have suggested abandoning the sector and coming back when things are more stable."

One of the other staff around the table nods. "We *do* need the manpower."

Valla holds his chin in his hand. "Hmmm, agreed. If there isn't anything happening there, we should divert the power to where it's needed. Keep a patrol carrier on alert nearby, I don't like the look of that Blargian wing."

One of the solid red dots on the map table in front of them flashes and a pulsating red circle appears around it.

"Sir, urgent message from Colonel Wellington. His position at the Choral Fortress is falling..."

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Bogon, Ratatosk system in the Igdrasil Sector. 9 December, 18:35
Standard Time

...

The airlock opens with a hiss, discharging a thick cloud. Cross sighs and wonders if it's just for some stupid effect, by the look on her captain's face, this is what happens every time.

Kuh-thuk.

Kuh-thuk.

Kuh-thuk.

Another menacing footstep sounds and a figure covered entirely in black armor appears from within the veil of smoke. The joints are a deep abyss black that practically makes the whole hallway darken, and the stiff portions on the legs, chest, and head are a perfectly smooth, mirror-finish black that seems to repel light. The stretched-bubble-like helmet gives no indication as to what way it is facing, but sends the chilling impression that it is staring straight at her, boring straight through her Duraplate Armor.

A moment passes and the black armored beast raises a Stelcorp Blaster, pointing it straight at her heart. Another black armor steps out and does the same. More footsteps, this time lighter, elegant steps, and the Proconsul in full ceremonial dress walks out of the fog. A robe of white silk, edged in blood red, embroidered with a blue triple-equilateral triangle design of the crest of Tak'sen. He looks like an ordinary human, though short as Cross, but the similarities stop when she looks at his eyes. Instead of being white with a colored iris and black pupil, like an ordinary creatures, his are a solid turquoise, with only a hint of a circle where the inner iris meets the pupil. He stops when he sees Angela, and the following two black-clad soldiers enter and snap up their Blasters at her as he snarles, "Lomban!"

Before they can start firing, Angela's commander steps forward. He puts his hand on the barrel of the nearest Blaster and pushes it down. "Please, wait a minute. This is Security Chief Cross, a member of my cre—"

The Grelbinian thinks that steam is going to explode out of his ears. "A *lomban* in your *SECURITY*! No wonder so many of your shipments have been booby-trapped!"

Angela tightens her fist, but her level-headed captain steps in before she can snap anything in retaliation of the accusation. The human keeps between the black-armor soldiers and Cross and barks, "Wait a minute. We haven't had this problem of a saboteur before. This is the first time—"

"That you have seen it, *human*." The Proconsul spits back, interrupting. He looks warily at the eight human crewmen including guards, then the human commander, then Angela, and again to the eight humans. He seems to decide that a confrontation isn't worth it, because he releases an exasperated sigh. *I'd hoped for the pride of the Oligarchy we could keep them from knowing about it, if just to save face that we couldn't stop the Kel'no'reem.* He snaps impatiently, "Give me the inventory list for the equipment."

The commander takes an e-clipboard from his quartermaster standing behind him and hands it to the Proconsul. The four Ta'ree guards lower their Blasters when the Proconsul takes the pad. The official reads over the inventory, noticing several lines are in red to indicate the losses due to the sabotage. After some darker muttering when looking over the lost star-fighters, the Proconsul hands the clipboard back to the commander. "The items destroyed before pick-up will of course be removed from the government expenses tab."

The commander hands the clipboard back to his quartermaster as he replies, "Of course, as per the contract."

Angela thinks that she's finally gotten off easy and is about to slip into the back of the group of the crew when the Proconsul snaps at her, "Lomban! You are the chief of security?" The Ta'ree spits out the title as if disgusted to associate it with the lombax standing in front of him. Cross neither nods nor shakes her head as she tries unsuccessfully to hold in a glare. The official continues anyway, "Have you caught the saboteur?"

"We have," she states dryly, barely keeping her tone under control. She crosses her arms in front of her chest as if to emphasize her curt reply. "He was caught destroying Megacorp property and will be tried for willful destruction of company property."

The Proconsul waves his hand as if trying to shoo away an annoying fly. "Very well. I wish to see him before taking what's left of the delivery back to Tak'sen."

Angela makes no motion, hoping that he'll just leave, but the commander motions for her to go down the hall, to take the Proconsul to the prisoner. Turning around nice and slowly, Cross makes her way down to the quarters where Rusko is held.

6. Ratchet

Chapter 6: Ratchet

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Falnar Galaxy, Himnot System in the Bifrost Sector. 9 December,
18:35 Standard Time

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“Oh, man. Where the hell am I?”

Ratchet slowly pushes himself up, noting that he somehow came to be lying, splayed across the passenger seat of his trusty old Megacorp fighter. At the time he got it, the Manta-class star-fighter was top-of-the-line, a brand new design. He looks up at the canopy to see that the thick, multi-layered transparent glassmetal is opaque in many large blotches, the cracks spread into less dangerous fracturing of the outermost layer. Through the few transparent portions, he can see stars rotating lazily. *I’m adrift. Great. Ya wanted to sneak off and avoid the reporters after Clank’s movie, and look where you get yourself, Ratchet.*

A burst of sparks suddenly flings out from a broken circuit panel behind the front seats, and Ratchet cringes. “I guess I’ve got some repairs to do.” *Why am I talking when nobody is around to listen?*

The small lombax reaches around the seat for a set of emergency tools behind the passenger seat. As soon as he extends his right arm, pain shoots through his forearm and he reflexively draws back, his other hand clamping down on the offending limb. He grits his teeth. *Just great. My arm must be broken. That and my ship.*

Ratchet carefully manages to extract the large, yellow tool case from underneath the passenger seat. He opens it and confirms that all of the tools he will probably need are inside. With one problem solved, he turns to determining what parts of his ship need to be repaired.

He eases himself into the pilot’s seat and looks at the control panel. Most of it seems to be in good working order, the lights blinking merrily as if he hadn’t just woken up from . . . whatever happened. Ratchet slaps the palm of his right hand on his forehead in aggravation, then hisses and immediately draws back that limb as the

pain reminds him that a bone is broken.

Below the control panel is the screen, a long crack running diagonally across the middle. *Crap. Please don't be broken, please don't be broken...* Ratchet carefully depresses a few buttons to activate an active diagram of the ship, and breathes a sigh of relief when a wire-frame image of his ship appears. Numerous parts of the ship are highlighted in red. He lets out a frustrated growl when he sees that one of the nonfunctional parts is his Gravimetric Warp Drive.

His ears spring up and his body goes rigid when he hears rapid 'tink tink's on the fighter's hull as small, metal particles of debris strike it. Ratchet closes the yellow toolbox and sits down in the pilot's seat, about to grasp the controls and hope that the thrusters still work when suddenly a bright light engulfs the fighter.

"What the hell?"

The fighter starts shaking violently, the rapid tremors causing Ratchet's teeth to rattle. He squeezes his hands on the control stick, then hisses and releases his right arm. Ratchet watches as his Megacorp fighter is swallowed up by a huge, blue-white maw. The sight is breathtaking.

Wait a second, there's something familiar about that.

The jarring seems to stop for a full second, and just as Ratchet begins to relax, the ship begins shaking again, this time in sinusoidal lurches rather than the rapid, bone-jarring vibration earlier. Ratchet can only hang on as his fighter plunges through what appears to be a shimmering tunnel.

The fighter falls down the tunnel backwards, and Ratchet watches the dark space at the far end of the tunnel disappear. The ship's motion calms and Ratchet sighs in relief, but a second later the jarring vibration returns and the wormhole vomits his fighter into a new region of space.

The spatial anomaly closes and Ratchet just sits there and breathes for a few minutes, trying to figure out what happens as his ship drifts through space. After regaining his bearings, relatively speaking, he carefully grasps the control stick and activates the thrusters.

The engines light up and he breathes thanks to whatever powers are out there that at least *some* of his ship still works. He swings the vessel around and blinks as a star bursts into view. Ratchet squints and carefully raises his right arm to shield his eyes. The ship continues to drift, still rotating, and the star disappears behind a huge planet.

Huge because of its close proximity. Ratchet brings the ship to a stop and looks around, trying to squint through the many cracks in the canopy.

He sees a blinking light in the moon's shadow and moves the ship closer. Surely enough, he finds a space station, with the blinking light indicating the entrance to the hangar.

"Yes!"

Ratchet waits for a moment for Clank to make a retort, then remembers that his little robotic sidekick isn't with him right now. Ratchet's ears droop a little and he maneuvers the little fighter through the partially open doors. His ship touches down, but the doors don't close and the sensors say there is no atmosphere in the hangar.

"Aw, nuts! I knew I should'a brought my rebreather."

Ratchet turns back to look at the hangar doors. The huge, metal-slab-like wedges hang partially open inward, just enough space for Ratchet to have guided the fighter inside. For some reason, a certainty fills him that the small hangar should be filled with air. An idea pops into his head.

"Well, it's a shot in the dark, but I don't see how it can get any worse."

Ratchet brings the fighter up and uses the fighter's nose to nudge the doors closed. Once the last one is in place, they lock with a click and dim, grimy lights activate in the hangar. Ratchet glances at the sensors to discover that, to his relief, the hangar is filling with an atmosphere.

Ratchet balls his hand into a fist and pumps it down, "Ye-SSSS!" He abruptly stops, the pain in his right arm shooting through his body again.

A few seconds pass and the outside of the canopy fogs over. Ratchet clicks a button and the canopy slides open with a hiss. Cold air hits Ratchet like a wall. Ratchet wrinkles his nose as it feels a sting, and he tries to decide if the sensation is from the cold or the smell. The hangar smells of stale oil and musty ventilation. He exhales and sees his breath vapor float out into the hangar, refusing to disappear. *Damn, it's cold.*

Ratchet hops down, still cradling his broken right arm. His boots hit the deck, his body perpendicular to the floor. That would have been the ideal landing if gravity was still "down", but no such luck.

Ratchet stumbles and falls, discovering that the gravity is at least 40 degrees off normal. He loses his footing and goes bouncing across the floor until the icy, unyielding metal wall of the hangar stops him. He slams into it, right arm and all, and promptly releases a primal scream as his bone fracture is jarred.

The determined lombax stands up, clutching his right arm. He looks 'up' at his fighter, then proceeds to scramble up to it, muttering darkly under his breath about wishing he had brought his Gravity Boots. After a minute of labored effort and breathing in air so frigid it cuts like an ice pick every breath, he finally makes it to his fighter, and with a little more difficulty he gets back into the cockpit and opens the toolbox.

7. Alken

Chapter 7: Alken

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Bogon, Ratatosk System in the Igdrasil Sector. 9 December, 19:37
Standard Time

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Angela leads the five-person Ta'ree entourage to the temporary brig, wondering why the Proconsul didn't leave behind his four intimidating guards. They would look ordinary enough since many armors cover their wearer completely from shoulder to toe, but theirs covers every square inch of them from top to bottom, and the slightly globule helms give her the unnerving impression that they are staring at her. The fact that they haven't put away their Blasters adds no reassurance.

Security chief Cross reaches the doors to the stripped-down quarters. Currently the door is guarded by a pair of Megacorp security robots. She nods to the nearest one and it turns around to open the door. As the door opens with its ever-so-slight hiss, Angela thinks she hears the Proconsul mutter something about police drones.

Angela takes a step towards the door, just enough to block it, then turns around. "You're going to have to leave your guards outside. No weapons in the brig."

Without missing a beat, the Proconsul replies, "Unacceptable. I am an official of the Ta'ree Oligarchy, I am not to be without escort."

"And this is my ship. I am the security chief. The rules are simple: no weapons in the brig. Either your guards stay outside, or they leave their weapons behind."

The Proconsul squints, thinking. After a few seconds, he turns to the two guards keeping formation behind him.

"Iktarana nabisai tongu ka."

"Nala haten mai ku, rama irangul agleshpa." A synthesized, androgynous voice answers, but since none of the four black-clad

guards move, Angela can't be sure which one replied.

“San hon tuma, arla morken se.”

The Proconsul turns back around. “One of my guards will surrender his weapons to the others, and that guard will accompany me. Is this acceptable?” The Proconsul throws out the last sentence as a sneer.

Still, the Proconsul will not leave until he has seen and spoken with Rusko, and the captain ordered her cooperation, so Cross yields. “Fine. Your guard leaves *all* his weapons with your other three, and those three stay out in the hall right here.”

One guard hands his Blaster, then a few other weapons Angela hadn't noticed to the other guards. After the weapon drop-off is finished, Angela steps through. The guard marches through the door, his heavy *kuh-thuk* footsteps making her nerves jittery, and the Proconsul follows last. Angela closes the outer door and waves to the guard sitting on a recliner inside.

The guard waves back, then gets up to open the doors to the stripped-down bedroom. Angela notes that although the Megacorp security robot has made no large movements, it tracks the black-clad Ta'ree guard with its eyes. The inner doors open and Angela steps through.

Rusko stands up and steps forward, not bothering to fake sleep this time. Angela walks farther into the room and waits, which surprises Rusko. Not only was he not expecting her back today, he wasn't expecting her to bring in anybody else. Then the Ta'ree guard steps in with his usual steady, slow but unstoppable march.

Rusko's eyes widen to impossible proportions. The fear is evident on his face, and he begins to instinctively backpedal, slipping on the smooth metal floor. He falls on his backside, but the only indication that he was aware of the fall is a twitch from his tail. Rusko continues to back up, his feet and arms thrusting him away from the guard until the prisoner lombax's back hits the wall.

“It's got Alken armor! We've been throwing everything we have at it, but —”

Abruptly, the transmission from the entrance of the compound is cut off. Rusko swallows, his tail twitching nervously as he re-adjusts his grip on his grenade gun. Behind him are strategically stacked crates, with carefully positioned snipers and automated turrets. Rusko hears a missile explode and swallows. I hope that we can at least do some damage to this

damned ‘angel of death’.

A few yards ahead are the thick section doors. Unfortunately, they aren’t blast doors and the Alken has placed a charge on it. Rusko remains ducked behind his cover, his eyes squeezed shut and his ears pressed flat against his skull in nervousness. Then, suddenly he feels a wave of pressure.

Rusko sees the flash and pieces of debris, what once was the door, go flying over the barricade cover. The defenders stand and unleash everything they have. Rusko pauses in momentary surprise. Rusko had heard of ‘Alken’ referred to by the singular, but now, standing here watching it, he is surprised to actually see that there is only one opponent.

The Alken stands there, silent and intimidating. It is clad entirely in black armor. The armor is sectioned, some of it shimmering like a perfect mirror under the fluorescent lights, deflecting their illumination, and the dull parts so black they seem to absorb light. The rather bulb-like helmet completely hides any trace of the Ta’ree wearing the armor, giving Rusko the disturbing feeling that this beast of destruction is staring straight at him.

Rusko snaps out of it and squeezes down on the trigger, sending a shock grenade at the Alken. His grenades join the lasers and other explosives that strike the Alken, but all of their blows seem to glance off harmlessly. Rusko watches his grenade hit and he instinctively squints his eyes. The weapon goes off and the Alken barely flinches at the force of the enhanced grenade.

The Alken holds out its arms, laser chainguns in both hands. Laser fire erupts into the barricade like a disjointed stream, and Rusko hears screams around him. His sense of sound begins to return and he is dimly aware of the snipers. The laser fire spraying at him penetrates the crate behind him, and the barricade erupts in a fireball, throwing Rusko aside like a rag doll.

A loud ‘PA-SHRAK’ rips the air as the sniper fire resumes, a depleted raritarianium slug splits through the explosion. The sliver-shaped projectile races straight and true on its path to the Alken’s neck.

. . . Rusko’s heart sinks when a yellow energy shield pops into being around its head and body, deflecting the shot. Rusko tries to lever up his grenade launcher and send the rest of his clip at the Alken, but his arm doesn’t respond. A gray starts creeping in from the edges of Rusko’s vision and he is dimly aware that the laser fire resumes. A scream reaches his ears just before unconsciousness claims him.

Rusko is only peripherally aware of Angela and the Proconsul’s presence as the Ta’ree official smirks and dryly states, “Hello, lomban.”

8. The 'Resistance'

Chapter 8: The “Resistance”

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Bogon, Ratatosk System in the Igdrasil Sector. 9 December, 18:38
Standard Time

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Angela steps into Rusko’s holding room, forcing as calm an exterior as she can with one of those black... *things* following her. She enters the room and takes a few steps in. Rusko sees her and nods subtly in greeting. The Alken follows her into the room.

Rusko sees it and his eyes go wide. He starts to tip backwards and trips, then backpedals for the foot and a half until the wall stops him. His eyes remain wide with fright as the Alken steps forward. Its footfalls are steady, each one making an intimidating ‘thump’. The Alken takes two paces towards Rusko and stops, turning to stand at attention. The Ta’ree Proconsul then walks in.

He sees the fearful look on Rusko’s face and notes the terrified lombax’s rapid breathing. A smirk crosses his face at the minor victory, but he quickly returns to a stoic expression and dryly states, “Hello, *lomban*.”

Cross throws him a quick warning glare at the sneer tone that the Proconsul says ‘lomban’ with, and though he perceives the gesture he gives no response.

The Proconsul turns his solid turquoise eyes to the lombax prisoner. *He wears a Megacorp uniform. He must have been bought off by the terrorists.* “Lomban. How much were you paid to sabotage the shipment to the Ta’ree?”

At the Proconsul’s question, Rusko blinks and tears his gaze from the Alken. He realizes he is on the ground and shifts in an attempt to give the appearance that he meant to fall over backwards. Angela has to stifle a laugh. He lifts up his right arm and examines the fur on his fingers, completely ignoring the Ta’ree’s question.

“Answer me, Megacorp lackey!” Rusko involuntarily jumps in

surprise at the Proconsul's shout. "You may have been told some sad sap story about the lomban 'rebellion' in Tak'sen and nonsense about them being some noble, persecuted group hunted by the Oligarchy. It is nonsense. The self-proclaimed 'freedom fighters' are nothing more than terrorists who aren't afraid to stoop to using chemical and biological weapons and guerilla warfare against non-military targets."

Rusko bristles, but immediately locks down his reaction. Fortunately, it was only momentary, and the Proconsul misses it. However, Angela does not, though she notes that there is no sign at all in the Proconsul's expression that he might be exaggerating or lying.

"How many agents are there in the Bogon Galaxy?"

Rusko smirks widely at the Proconsul. "Thousands. They sent a whole army."

The Proconsul's lips curl up in a snarl that is quashed before it can fully form. He snaps at no-one in particular, "He knows nothing." With that, he turns on his heel with measured precision and walks out the still-open door, his robes billowing around him adding to his angry demeanor. The Alken follows and the guard outside closes the door.

Angela crosses her arms. "I suppose that stuff he said about terrorism and chemical—"

"Lies! I would never stoop to such barbaric, cowardly means, and neither would any of my comrades!" Rusko stands and folds his arms across his chest as he turns away, his ears pressed back against his head to clearly convey his offense at the accusation.

Security Chief Cross sighs and rolls her eyes upward as she turns around. She knocks on the door and the guard outside opens the door for her. She steps into the main room, most of its furnishings removed, and notices the Proconsul and Alken standing next to the exit door. Before she can proceed to the door, one of the guards walks up to her. "Hey, we got a call from inventory. They wanted you to check out something they found while going through the sabo—"

"His *name* is Rusko." Angela turns a cold glare at the guard, then at the insensitive look on the Proconsul's face. "I suppose you wouldn't know if Rusko was one of your so-called 'terrorists'."

The Proconsul makes a face. "I wouldn't know. We try not to publish the names of insurgents, even if we know them. Getting their names in the news just seems to encourage them." He looks at her as he waits for her to have the exit opened. "I know you may not believe

it, being an outsider.”

Angela walks to the door and the guard opens it. He seems rather overly interested in the conversation the Proconsul is about to have, but one look from Angela and he backs up and stands at attention, trying to pretend as if he wasn't trying to listen in.

The Proconsul follows Angela outside, followed by the Alken. The black-clad figure retrieves its weapons from the other Alken, and then the four take their positions around the Proconsul, ahead and to both sides, and behind and to both sides. This time they leave a much more comfortable distance from Angela. She and the Proconsul turn back to the courier ship.

The proconsul shakes his head. “You're thinking it's all propaganda and garbage, general stuff that we make up to whip our loyalists into a frenzy. I wish it was.” He looks down and closes his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger before looking ahead again.

“On a warm twelfth of March, there was a bus-stop. Supposedly it was used by Ta'ree army recruits. A lomban insurgent walked up to the stop and when the bus pulled over and opened up, he stood up and blew himself up. A High-Incendiary explosive, think a huge napalm bomb. It killed him instantly. A police officer was nearby, he got caught by the blast radius, but survived until medical attention arrived. The bus driver wasn't so lucky. He took the full force of the blast and died in minutes. There were twenty-three civilians on that bus. Factory workers. Computer technicians. A power company executive. One woman worked as a model for an advertising corporation, 'Niiman and Sons'.”

“A group of militia arrived to secure the area and prevent any follow-up attacks to finish off the survivors. Three passengers and the two waiting civilians at the stop died before the medics arrived. Seventeen of the remaining passengers died on the way to the hospital or shortly after, and the three that survived had permanent disfiguring scars.”

Cross looks at him with more skepticism, the ears on her head betraying her doubt. The Proconsul snuffs and continues speaking. “All Ta'ree are required to serve at least two years in the military to protect the Oligarchy. I was one of those militia soldiers.” The Proconsul looks back up. “I escorted that woman to the hospital. She died on the way.”

They reach the hallway intersection next to the dock and the

Proconsul stops. Cross looks at him with lingering disbelief. “Why would you tell me these things?”

Two of the Alkens walk into the courier and the other two step close behind the Ta’ree official. He sighs once more before replying, “I wanted you to know. I’m not sure what you think of us, but I’d rather that you know our side.” He shrugs, as if not entirely sure what else to add or say, and then steps past Cross to enter the courier, followed by the last two Alken.

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Bogon, Ratatosk System in the Igdrasil Sector. 9 December, 18:41
Standard Time

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Angela walks down the corridors to Inventory to check out whatever it was the guard was about to tell her about. She could call in, but since the Proconsul was taking another inventory check and the payment still hadn’t been arranged, there was plenty of extra time for her to personally check on it.

The small set of double-doors slide open and Cross walks into the locker-lined room. Several tables take up the bulk of the room’s interior, one of them holds Rusko’s things — minus his most of his weapons and suit, which have already been hidden away. “You called me to come see something?”

A short, rather round human with comically thick glasses over his eyes scrambles up excitedly. “Yes, of course! We’ve been having a blast cataloging all of the gizmos we confiscated from that saboteur. However, there’s this one item that none of us can figure out.” He holds out a steel-gray object hanging from a delicate-looking chain.

Angela takes it and carefully examines it. The chain is stronger than it looks, but if the thing is something of military issue it seems like it shouldn’t even have a chain. She lets the chain hang off her hand and examines the metal object attached to it. The object is round, a little over three centimeters in diameter, and about a half a centimeter thick.

She adjusts her grip on the object. Its surface is plain, flat but not shiny, generally unremarkable. It has a line passing through its middle along the circumference, with a spot that might be a hinge on the bottom. The human in charge of inventory notices where Angela’s eyes are lingering. In his slightly squeaky voice, he chatters, “That’s been what’s gotten my attention. I just *know* that thing opens, but I

can't figure out how."

On a hunch, she holds it on the edge of her palm and squeezes with her furry fingers. The object, now apparently a locket, clicks open. On one side is a shoulder-high picture of a female lombax with darkish-tan fur and long, dark orange stripes, a soft smile across her face. Her eyes are a calm blue, and they seem to hold a twinkle of light. Leaning into her is an adorable six-year-old lombax that looks very much like the older one, a huge grin across her face; a laugh caught in still for all time.

Angela looks at the right side of the locket. In this side is another picture, this one a high shot of the six-year-old lombax in a simple blue jumpsuit. The young girl is standing, looking up and reaching out towards the camera as if trying to reach her way out of the still picture and into reality. Angela notices that the girl's stripes are long, like the silhouette-breaking stripes on a tiger. She looks at her eyes to see vibrant violet irises, and suddenly she thinks of a resemblance to someone she knows.

Cross feels a lump rising in her throat, and a dirty sensation like she violated somebody's personal privacy washes over her and she slowly looks up, away from the locket in her hand. Well, here was proof that at least *some* of what Rusko said was true. Now he sat curled up in a solitary holding cell and she stood here holding a locket of his family. The security chief closes the locket, which clasps back shut with a click.

Today is just too complicated. First she finds out from Rusko that her security job is to protect weapons used by a depraved government and then . . . Angela shakes her head, the locket feeling strangely heavy in her hand. *There is one thing I could do.* Her mouth feels dry, but she manages, "Thank you, crewman."

She stands up and begins to walk out when the human interrupts her with a squeak. "You can't just walk out of here with that! That's a catalogued item confiscated from—"

"It's a personal family locket you dolt! What harm could there possibly be in letting him have a picture of his family!" The human shrinks back timidly and Angela storms out of the room. For some reason, it just doesn't feel *right* for her not to give it back to Rusko. After a minute of walking, she reaches the holding quarters and barges in.

Rusko jerks awake from a position with his back against the wall and his knees pulled up close to his chest. He stands up, his ears back,

showing that he's still angry from the time she insinuated he was some thug of a terrorist. Then his eyes snap to the gray object in her hand and he instinctively grabs for it.

Cross watches him try to grab at it from two meters across the room, stumbling but compensating and nimbly returning to his usual, gracefully balanced self. She walks to him and holds out the pendant, her thumb pressing a part of the chain against her palm.

Rusko more calmly reaches for it, cupping his hands under it. Angela drops it into his hands and he holds it gingerly, as if it was something made of crystal that could be broken if handled too roughly. He clicks it open and gingerly runs one finger around the rim as he looks at the picture on the right and his composure wavers.

“My little Miiksha.”

9. Legacy

Chapter 9: Legacy

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Falnar Galaxy, Himnot System in the Bifrost Sector. 9 December,
19:36 Standard Time

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A rather loud ratcheting sound echoes through the cavernous, grimy hangar as Ratchet uses his wrench to finish tightening a replacement hose. Finally, the wrench fights against continued rotation with enough resistance that Ratchet decides the patching is good enough. He lets his tired left arm down slowly, making sure the wrench doesn't slide in the off-kilter gravity. Once he is sure the Omniwrench won't slide across the tilted floor, he checks his right arm. The sling is rather flimsy cloth, but it was the best he could cobble together from the incomplete first-aid kit stowed in the fighter and it does the job. The frustrated lombax sighs as he stands up and looks around the hangar.

As he exhales, his breath forms a thick, white fog that floats outwards in the frigid environment. The air is still stale and piercingly cold, but at least it remains breathable. The off-white walls of the hangar seem an even darker gray due to the wanting lighting and the grime smearing the walls. To compensate for the dim and sometimes flickering lighting, Ratchet clipped a lantern to the wing to illuminate the section he is working on. Several large segments of the hull armor have been levered up to grant him access to the more delicate workings inside.

Though the status of the fighter is returning to what Ratchet might accept as space worthy, the repairs are still going slowly. And, quite unfortunately for him, he doesn't have replacement parts for all of the pieces of his fighter that need attention. Ratchet puts his wrench away and jumps into the fighter's cockpit. A tarp lies draped across most of the rear section, sitting on top of it is the Gravimetric Warp Drive, open and with pieces carefully set aside.

Ratchet sits down in the pilot's seat and punches a button to start the ship's systems. With a rumble, the power goes on and the console

blinks merrily. Ratchet stretches his arm and cracks the knuckles in his left hand, then gets back to work. He grips the control joystick and the thrusters begin to activate. The screen shows a rotating wire-frame diagram of the ship, many parts still red but the important ones green. A blinking red outline shows the missing warp drive, reminding Ratchet that he needs to find a few microcapacitors.

The lombax reaches towards the keyboard and opens the navigation computer. When it opens without an error or other unpleasant problem, he breathes a sigh of relief, expelling a long cloud of vapor. The memory unit is undamaged, and it opens his flight path since the Solana Galaxy easily. With that last check done, Ratchet shuts down the ship and jumps back down.

As his Gravity Boots hit the floor, Ratchet notices an outline in the grime of the wall. The shape hardly shows at all, were it not for the grime around it he might have never seen the shape. Curious, the lombax creeps towards it.

As he correctly assumed, a door rests in the wall. On its right and halfway up the large rectangle's height, he notices a brief break in the grime. Some sort of metal panel, the same color and type of metal as the rest of the wall. *How did the people who built this place get around? I'd be lost every day.* Ratchet reaches out for it and jumps back in surprise when it slides up to reveal a small, utilitarian control panel. As Ratchet leaves the short detection radius, the panel slides back down to protect the controls.

Ratchet steps forward and reaches for the panel again. It slides up, and now he examines the control panel. A small, five-centimeter-by-five-centimeter screen sits at the top. Below that are nine white, unlabeled buttons of equal size arranged in a three-by-three grid. Below those sits a larger, slightly blue button with an icon that looks somewhat like a partially open door. Ratchet lightly pushes the button and is pleasantly surprised when what he thought would happen . . . happens. The door slides to the left away from the control panel, revealing a much less grimy corridor.

As the door slides open, air blasts out of the airlock and Ratchet almost gags. While the air in the hangar was piercingly cold and stale, at least it was breathable. This air is slightly warmer but not pleasantly so, and it brings a musky smell like a decrepit, rotting attic. Ratchet coughs a few times and waves at the air in front of his nose, as if he could make the stink of rot and other unpleasant smells go away.

After about a minute of coughing and gagging, he finally forces

himself to breathe the musky air without retching. The room beyond the first door is made of the same off-white, almost ceramic material as the surfaces in the hangar. It is probably some sort of crash-resistant material to contain damage. Across the airlock is another door, but this one has been cut open with some sort of powerful welding torch. He looks into the hallway beyond and notices that the floor and walls have been scored by laser fire.

The lombax walks through the outer door, preparing himself for the gravity to abruptly change. To his dismay, he discovers that it is off-kilter here as well. *It must be like this all across the station.*

Ratchet takes off at an easy, loping jog down the hallway. Its lighting is much like the hangar. At least half of the lights don't function at all, and most of the ones that do are dim. Some of the functioning lights flicker.

The walls are still rather utilitarian, but a slightly more aesthetically pleasing gray than the off-white of the hangar. He also notices that the floor has regular squares of some sort of synthetic carpet. Though almost as hard as the metal floor of the hangar, the spaces are a welcome break from the frigid cold and monotonous stretch of off-white crash-resistant alloy in the hangar.

After passing a few doors, most of them grimy and rather obviously jammed shut, he comes across one that looks almost pristine compared to the rest of the station. He walks up to it and without even having to reach for the 'open' button, the door slides open to invite him in.

The room beyond is very dark. It is lit occasionally by medium blue lights. The walls are lined by huge computer workstations with multiple monitors and large, curving keyboards. Though chairs once sat in the center of the utilitarian, curved workstations, now only frames with occasional shreds of synthetic upholstery remain.

Most of the monitors at the stations are dark. Three stations have active monitors, but they only show static. Occasionally one of the monitors will blink. A fourth station is dimmed, but Ratchet has a strange sensation that this one still works. He walks to it and tries to push the chair back along a track in the floor so he can get to the workstation. The chair snaps off a weakened connection at the base and clatters onto the ground, breaking in four more places. Ratchet cringes and his ears press flat against his head, but then he remembers that he's alone on the station.

He steps carefully over the broken pieces of chair and begins to

reach for the keyboard when all of the lit buttons at the station flash brightly. His hands zip up to shield his eyes from the momentary light. The five display monitors activate. The central one is black, with a green blinking underscore. A camera with a red backlight whirs into focus on him. Some text prints out on the screen:

Hello, Dave.

“Who the hell is Dave?”

Last user to log in.

“My name is Ratchet!”

A pause.

Hello, Ratchet.

Ratchet silently observes the other monitors at the station. Three of them show rotating diagrams of DNA molecules, a fourth shows a diagram of a human, the nervous system. *Too bad Cross isn't here, genetics is her area of expertise.* Ratchet carefully looks over the nervous system picture, and is surprised when a new window pops up over the body, showing a zoomed-in display of the brain stem, the spot where he was looking at. *Wait a second, this isn't human.*

Have you come to inspect the progress of Project Ta'ree?

Ratchet's attention zips back to the main screen, black with green text. “Uh, yeah.” Ratchet's right eyebrow rises and he mutters, “What the heck does ‘Ta'ree’ mean?”

Ta'ree: conjunction of “Ta” meaning ‘advanced, great, superior, above’ and “Ree”, a derivation of colloquial “Rehee” or “Reh'ee” meaning “humans, the sentient species of Terra III”.

“So...” *So, this thing thinks I'm supposed to be some inspector. Let's start by finding out what this project is.* “How's the improvements?”

Unfortunately, since the last successful batch, systems have been unable to create a greater than 0.00125 percent increase in any of the selected attribute fields.

“What are these Ta'ree? What is the purpose of the project?”

When humans were discovered, they had a low compatibility with cybernetics. However, they also had a deeper connection to their seven senses. Lomban launched a project to make them more compatible, stronger, faster, smarter, more in tune with their senses. The operation was named Project Ta'ree.

Often, the full effect of words is lost on people. However, images are rarely mis-interpreted. “Show me.”

The main monitor flickered. An image of a primitive lomban ship approaching earth replaced the black screen with green text. A small black bar remained across the bottom of the screen, it displayed captions to explain the short video clips, though they were largely unnecessary. Ratchet could plainly see the lomban ships kidnapping humans and forcing them into labs, where they were tested on like creatures lower than lab rats. Ratchet could see the grand plans made by the bureaucrats who had no idea what they were doing, and the glee of the geneticists who did. Ratchet could easily see the first horribly mutated attempts...

“Computer, stop.”

The computer obeyed instantly, flickering back to its original black with a blinking green underscore. For a few minutes, Ratchet just stood there, trying to keep down the bile. *They were trying to play God, my people were trying to play God. To create life, and manipulate it to suit their pleasures.*

“Can this data be transferred to a portable medium?”

Before Ratchet could then wonder about how he was going to interface this technology with something he had in his MegaCorp fighter, a drawer popped open. Lying inside it was what looked like a large, incredibly fat e-pad, like a clipboard too bulky for its own good. Ratchet reached in and picked up the device. It was even heavier than it looked, and felt more like trying to carry an anvil than an electronic pad.

Before Ratchet could turn around to leave, a thought entered his head. He couldn’t remember how he got where he was, but somehow something about those Ta’ree seemed familiar. “Computer, do you have visual records of modern Ta’ree vessels?”

Affirmative.

“Show me anything active within the past week. Start from the smallest.”

The screen flickered and a still image of a tiny probe appeared. There was a label caption on the bottom of the screen, but Ratchet ignored it. “Faster.” A few more images flashed through, progressing through fighters and then something that looked like aerial bombers. After a minute, Ratchet saw something he knew he had seen before. “Wait, go back!”

The ship that appeared wasn't familiar. "Go back again."

Another ship appeared, a light patrol destroyer. *That's it, that's the ship that attacked me.* Ratchet's memory of hailing the frigate, only to hear them shout something to the tune of "die, lomban scum" before they opened fire.

A hard edge cutting into his left arm forced his attention back to the present. He was still holding the absurdly heavy data pad with the evidence, and his ship remained in pieces in the hangar. He has work to do.

10. The Gulag Archipelago

Chapter 10: The Gulag Archipelago

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Bogon, Ratatosk System in the Igdrasil Sector. 9 December, 21:50
Standard Time

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He is running, sprinting to something for all he's worth. All around him is inky blackness, but none of that matters. All that is important is straight ahead.

"Ruuuuuskoooooooo." A soft, silky, feminine voice floats through the void from an indeterminate point in the direction Rusko is running. He leans forward and sprints faster. Despite the fact that he is sprinting full-tilt, he isn't panting. He isn't even breathing heavily.

"Ruuuskoooooooo." The voice again. Rusko feels his heart flutter at the beautiful sound, yet at the same time he shudders.

Suddenly, a lombax appears in front of him. Since nobody ever ponders oddities in a dream, Rusko immediately stops. The female lombax is a few inches taller than Rusko, though the difference is not great. Her ears seem slightly longer than a normal lombax's, and her fur is a slightly darker shade of the standard yellow-orange lombax. She has long, dark orange stripes gracing her fur. Though her mouth is turned up in a smile, her ears are postured neutrally and the smile doesn't reach her sparkling blue eyes, so the expression seems one of extreme sadness.

"Ranaia!" Rusko throws himself at her in a crushing hug. A sob wracks his body.

The woman takes his arms from around her shoulders and steps away. He looks at her with his wide eyes full of hurt and fear. She looks at him despondently and speaks with the same calm, almost haunting tone with which she was calling his name. "Love, where are you? We've been waiting so long."

Rusko falls to his knees and reaches out to her, but she takes one step back. Tears begin to escape from his eyes into the fur below and he whispers, "I'm sorry. I'm trying so hard."

She looks down at him and though her feet don't move, she begins drifting backwards. She speaks and her voice seems to fill the air like an echo with the same haunting tenor. "Rusko, how could you have forgotten about us? What about our little girl?"

Ranaia quickly fades into the inky blackness to be replaced by a little six-year-old lombax girl in a simple blue jumpsuit. Her violet eyes glitter and she reaches out towards Rusko. "Daddy, save me!"

"MIIKSHA!" Rusko wastes no time to push himself to his feet and launch himself forward. However, Miiksha stays just as far away.

Rusko pours all of his energy into sprinting forward, but the distance between he and Miiksha only grows. A vicious razor-wire fence erupts from the inky blackness in between Rusko and his girl, spanning an infinite distance to both sides and rising tens of meters up.

The girl crosses her arms against a cold Rusko doesn't feel, and he sees snowflakes falling on her side of the fence.

"Miiiiikshaaaa!"

The sound of the door sliding open smashes Rusko into consciousness like a skier falling into an avalanche. He keeps his eyes closed and, though he fails to hide an instinctive flick of the ear, he keeps his muscles relaxed and wills himself to calm down from the dream. He'd been caught in the same situation before.

"Even for someone who moves around a lot, you sure take every chance you can to sleep."

Rusko takes a few seconds to recognize the voice as Angela's, and he holds in a response, *If you knew what I saw when I closed my eyes you wouldn't call it rest.* He flicks his ears in an irritated fashion and uncurls. He hadn't realized he had practically rolled himself up into a ball while sleeping. Fortunately, his heart rate has dropped and he doesn't smell the tears he knew he was crying in his unconsciousness. He stands up and crosses his arms, but doesn't face Angela. He still remembers the time she appeared with that Ta'ree, and then accused him of terrorism. He focuses on that anger to suppress the despair from the dream.

"The Proconsul finished his inspection, he took off through the wormhole with the shipment and we're returning to dock."

"Thank you for coming and telling me, a prisoner of MegaCorp, that relevant and highly vital piece of information."

Angela crosses her arms and shoots an irritated glare at Rusko. "I'm trying to be courteous! I don't know what it's like down in this plain room and there isn't even a proper bed to sleep on. I thought you'd be bored so I thought I'd come down here and tell you what's going on. I hoped to have a simple conversation." She leaves out the bit about her having come to interrogate him a little. She notices that he doesn't seem to be holding the locket, and it isn't visible outside his MegaCorp jumpsuit. "*I did bring you that locket.*"

Rusko's gaze drops to the floor, his shoulders slouch, and his ears loosely fall back against his head. His hand drifts to a virtually imperceptible bulge on the jumpsuit, and the security chief realizes he's hiding it under her clothing. Angela sighs, unable to keep herself from feeling some pity for the dejected lombax prisoner. Even so, he's annoying her. "Ru-sko!"

Quite abruptly, Rusko places himself about three inches from Angela, his entire body quivering with anger, fangs bared and hand held like he's ready to claw her. "Don't you *ever* speak to me like that again." *My wife used to do that to me when she thought I was being a pest. Only she can talk to me like that.*

An eyebrow rises on Angela's face, but she remains otherwise calm outwardly. She takes a few steps to the wall with the door and briefly considers sitting down against it. *No, I shouldn't. 'You're not allowed to put yourself in a vulnerable position when with a prisoner'.* Instead, she leans against the wall. "Sorry." She stops and a few seconds tick by before she decides it is appropriate to speak again. "What were you doing when we caught you, anyway?"

"Exactly what it looked like. Sabotaging weapons bound for the Ta'ree."

Angela rolls her eyes upwards and releases a frustrated exhale. "I know that much. But how were you planning on doing it? Why were you trying?"

"Because anything I can do to hurt the Ta'ree is good for me."

"So what, is this just a holiday jaunt you go on because you *can*? What's the point? Just to 'hurt' them?"

"They hurt me first!"

The room instantly becomes dead silent following the bellow. Rusko hadn't meant for that to slip out. The seconds tick by. If Rusko were a human he would have been sweating. His heart is already pounding in his chest, and he can feel his ears growing hot.

“It’s your family, isn’t it? They did something to your family, and you’ve never forgiven them for it.”

Rusko walks a few paces away and sits against the wall. He stares forward, away from Angela. “My family is my own concern.” *I dragged them into this stupid war, I don’t want to drag anyone else into it.*

“C’mon, what harm can it do?”

Rusko sighs deeply, but he seems to relent. The lombax reaches into the front of his MegaCorp jumpsuit and draws out the locket, then opens it. “The police. The Ta’ree police took them away. Because of me.”

“You were working with the resistance?”

Rusko huffs quietly and smiles bitterly. “No, they just suspected me of it. I played pretend that I was when I was a child, but every lombax did. I grew up, married Ranaia. One of the guys from my old neighborhood bumped into me, wanted to recruit me. I didn’t want anything coming between me and my family, so I refused. Then one day, Miiksha disappeared, and Ranaia never came home.” Rusko’s expression hardens, a long time of resentment rising like bile in his gut. “I knew that no lombax ever comes back from a gulag. I only had one choice.”

Angela silently ponders Rusko’s words for a while. *That’s when he joined, and why. They stole his family from him.* “Gulag?”

Rusko throws a glance at Angela. At first he thinks she’s insulting him, but then realizes that she really doesn’t understand. For his whole life, Rusko had never met someone who never knew the slang for the death camps. “Gulag. It’s a Russian word. They’re prison camps where the Ta’ree send you to die. Oh, sure, they *say* it’s only a sentence of a few years. But those who don’t starve to death freeze in the arctic camps or die of dehydration in the arid ones *ever* come back. Even the humans sent there stay for *years* longer than their sentence . . . the ones that *do* come back.”

Angela crosses her arms behind her back and looks down. She searches for any sign of untruth, but she can’t see any sign of deception in that dejected look as he traces his finger around the locket’s edge. Cross fidgets a little. “I’m sorry.”

Rusko is about to say something, Angela guesses snapping a retort, but before he can speak, the door opens and one of the guards sticks his head inside. “Security chief Cross? The Commander’s got an important call for you.”

“If you hadn’t noticed, I’m a little busy. Weren’t you supposed to be slacking off in a chair in the main room instead of interrupting here?”

The guard looks rather unappreciated. “B . . . but Cross, a MegaCorp Manta-class fighter just left the wormhole. It’s transmitting a distress signal and he wants you to organize a perimeter at the primary cargo bay.”

Angela sighs and rolls her eyes. “Sorry, Rusko. I’ve got to—”

Suddenly, the lights dim and the main lights go out. Replacing them is a mellow glow of amber-colored lights, indicating a tactical alert. Klaxons blare, roaring their warning throughout the ship. Both Angela and Rusko jump in surprise, and Rusko clamps his hands over his ears.

A voice clicks on over the ship intercom, “Battle stations! The refugee ship is under attack and is declaring mayday!”

Angela jogs out of the holding room and into the hallway, leaving the guards to shut the doors behind her. As she heads to the bridge, she reaches to her shoulder radio. “Cross to command, patch the refugee’s signal in. I want to hear it.”

Angela’s shoulder radio clicks, and she hears some of the ambient noise on the bridge. She can hear the tactical officer’s voice, but can’t quite tell what he’s saying. After a few moments, the communications officer speaks again. “We’ve lost the signal, the refugee ship is still under fire. Cross, are you still on this channel? Get to the cargo bay!”

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This chapter is dedicated to Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, author of *The Gulag Archipelago*, after which this chapter is named. The *Gulag Archipelago* is a long and intensive book (and only for mature readers), so I’m not sure if I’d recommend reading it, but Solzhenitsyn has written several good stories about the wrongs of Soviet life and the travesties of the Gulags that might be interesting reads.

By the way, on this mile-marker chapter, I would like to thank Warrior for the encouraging reviews, and especially the helpful criticism left on chapter 2. I did a face-palm when I realized that I accidentally misspelled Angela’s name.

11. Geneticist

Chapter 11: Geneticist

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Bogon, Ratatosk System in the Igdrasil Sector. 9 December, 21:55
Standard Time

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Cross jogs into the airlock, ignoring the dirty looks thrown at her from behind the masks of the more heavily armed guards for being late. Four medics wait tensely, emergency kits in one hand and the other resting on a wheeled stretcher in the center of the airlock. The inner door slides closed and Cross takes a heavy Lancer from one of the guards as a precaution.

A sudden, screeching jar shakes the airlock, almost knocking Cross off her feet and succeeding in downing a few of the humans. A second bash of what Cross assumes is the fighter smashing into a wall in the cargo bay shakes the larger ship again. She looks at a monitor on the side of the airlock, seeing the view of a camera overlooking the mostly-empty space. An agonizingly long three seconds pass as the heavy doors to space close, sealing the primary cargo bay.

All of the vents open and they blast air into the enclosed space in an emergency atmosphere venting. Cross notes worriedly that the canopy of the Megacorp fighter has been smashed opaque, and several lines indicating fissures blast atmosphere out of the cockpit. The fighter is twisted and smashed as if a giant rent it with massive fists and tossed it into the freighter cargo bay. Sparks erupt from various ruptures in the wing and points in the body.

Finally the light in the airlock turns green. The security team bursts in and fans out, but on seeing the damage with their own eyes they quickly lax their guard. A screeching wine and the sound of shearing glassmetal emanates from the fighter. The canopy lifts up — most of it, anyway. The front half begins to lift up, then deforms due to the massive damage and bends back down towards its resting place on the cockpit and breaks, landing in a loud but relatively harmless crash.

The larger half, still connected to the struggling motor, lifts up,

curling under its own weight and damage. One of the burly security guards, clad in thick white and red armor, jogs up to the fighter and bodily smashes away the forward portion of the canopy to allow the medical team easier access.

Cross nears the fighter, and the first sign of passengers is a series of gurgling hacks. The medics jump up and carefully lift a short figure from a sprawled position across the front seats. Angela notices a tail and long ears, a dead giveaway to being a lombax. The pilot wears a faintly familiar green suit, darkened by large splotches of a dark, wet red.

As she nears the fighter, she gets a better look at the pilot himself. Definitely a lombax, his fur is a familiar golden color, with rich brown triangular stripes, all smattered with blood. The security chief notes with concern that he's bleeding profusely, even from his ears, nose, and mouth. His right arm is in a flimsy sling, which the medics promptly cut and throw aside.

The lombax makes a gurgling sort of groan as they move him onto a stretcher and lay his right arm across his chest. Though Cross has plenty of medical training, the other guards already are dealing with the task of recovering him to a medical facility, so she stands back and watches, wracking her brain to try to find why this badly wounded lombax seems so familiar.

"Breathing erratic, heart rate weak and dropping! Get him to sickbay!"

The security personnel between the fighter and airlock quickly move out of the way and the four medics run, pushing the wheeled stretcher. She makes a cursory glance over the twisted wreckage of the Manta-class fighter, its Bogon Blue paint finish burnt by laser scarring and scraped by the impact of crashing into the empty cargo bay. Following standard procedure, she circles the fighter, then slowly moves to investigate the cockpit. A two-seater model, aside from a lot of blood on the pilot's side and a cracked view screen in the middle of the forward controls, she doesn't notice anything. The passenger's side is empty . . . wait, what is this?

Cross kneels down, discovering what she first thought a strange splatter of blood is actually an overly thick, blocky e-pad. It looks smudged and years old. After checking carefully for traps, she puts away her Lancer and picks it up. The item is not only bulky, but even heavier than it looks. It feels more like an anvil digging into her arm than a light e-pad. She hops down and examines it as she walks towards the airlock to inventory, not noticing the blinking green

underscore that appeared on the screen when she grabbed it. *I wonder what this device could be. I'll bet that human will enjoy having another trinket to log in.*

"You want me to take that down to Inv?" One of the other security guards, standing just inside the airlock, asks with as gentle a voice as the naturally gruff human can.

"Sure, why not." Angela hands the heavy thing to him and clasps her hands behind her back and wonders how that injured lombax is doing.

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Bogon, Deep Space in the Igdrasil Sector. 10 December, 06:51
Standard Time

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A figure paces back and forth behind the clouded windows on the double doors sealing the intensive care unit of the command freighter's sickbay. A medic sits on a chair at a small desk in the far corner, filling out a report. The other medic opens the doors, "Uh, Cross. You asked to be notified when he became conscious."

Angela crosses her arms and the medic meekly slips past her to escape, leaving her to the doctor. The medics wouldn't let her near the lombax last night, they spent more than three hours in surgery and pumping nanites into him. Now his wounds are gone and the blood on his fur washed away. His eyes are closed, and Cross wonders if he was really awake.

The doctor signs a line at the bottom of his page and stands up, clipboard in hand. He walks over to the table with the lombax on it. "Hey, c'mon. You were awake a minute ago." He pokes the lombax at the base of the ear with his pen.

The lombax shifts a little and Angela inquires, "So, how's he doing now?"

The lombax's eyes pop open and he pushes himself to a sitting position. The white sheet covering him falls from his shoulders where it had been drawn up to when he was asleep. A wide grin splits his face. "Angela? Damn, it's been . . . almost a year since I've seen you last!"

Angela Cross almost jumps in surprise at that unmistakable voice, and a grin slowly creeps across her mouth. "Ratchet?" *I knew I knew him from somewhere down at the bay last night.*

Ratchet lifts his palm to his forehead and squeezes his eyes shut as if he's experiencing an enormous headache. A few seconds pass, then he opens them. "I seem to remember being barely alive in my fighter, but obviously I'm still alive. Just to make sure the past day wasn't a dream, I *did* crash into some ship's hangar?" He flexes his right arm experimentally.

"Cargo bay, actually. This is a freighter." Angela smiles and laughs lightly. "It's great to see you. What happened?"

"Oh, you know. After I beat up Nefarious back in Solona, the media started hounding me. There were interviewers and paparazzi everywhere I went, so I took off for a vacation." His eyes drop down. "I wonder how Clank's doing."

"How'd you get into the Falnar Galaxy?"

"The who what?"

The doctor awkwardly steps around the table Ratchet is sitting on, putting himself closer to the door. "Um, if you don't mind chief Cross, since the patient is fine, I'm going to go submit my report?"

Angela nods and the human leaves. "The Falnar Galaxy. Home to the Ta'ree, Megacorp's doing a lot of business with . . . What?"

The moment Angela said the word "Ta'ree", Ratchet's eyes snapped open. Now he's staring at Angela as if she grew tentacles and spouted purple gas. Ratchet manages to bumble out, "You know the Ta'ree?"

Angela's right eyebrow rises as she looks at Ratchet. "That's what I was just saying. Megacorp has a new contract with them, we supply them with equipment. Why?"

Ratchet looks at his feet, the gears in his head spinning as he tries to put together everything he learned while at the space station. "While I was in the Falnar galaxy, my fighter was attacked and crippled. I drifted through a wormhole to an abandoned station..." Ratchet looks down at his hands, then at the tables around the room's perimeter. "Hey, where is it?"

"What?"

"I brought a data pad from that station, it had all this information . . ." Ratchet cringes, ". . . about the Ta'ree. And how they were created. You were actually the person I was hoping I'd find, it's got tons of genetics stuff I can't make heads or tails of."

Angela's eyebrows momentarily rise in curiosity, then she reaches to her shoulder radio. "I'll check inventory. Is there anything you

wanted to point out in specific?”

Before Angela can click her radio, it clicks and she hears a guard’s voice. “Chief Cross, could you come down here? The saboteur’s refusing to eat or drink anything, and he’s refusing to say any . . . hey, was that a rude gesture? Get back here you little—”

Angela slaps her palm over her face, “Damn it, Rusko.” She lowers her hand and looks at Ratchet. “I’ve gotta go. When you can leave here, head down to inventory. After I’m done with Rusko I’ll stop by and authorize a check-out.”

Angela turns around and jogs out the doors. Ratchet grins and shakes his head. “*Chief* Cross? Man, I’ve been missing out on a lot.”

12. New Prisons

Chapter 12: New Prisons

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Bogon, Endako Orbit. 10 December, 06:55 Standard Time

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“...and then you *what*? How stupid are you? These people are Megacorp security, not Ta’ree secret police!”

Rusko flinches under Angela’s angry, piercing glare. The once proud lombax now feels an inch tall. Fortunately, before the incensed lombax woman can continue ranting, the door to the holding room opens. A Megacorp security robot dumps a short lombax in a plain blue Megacorp jumpsuit just inside the door, then sees Rusko and freezes in place.

Angela slaps her palm over her face and shakes her head, making her long hair swish behind her. “What *now*?”

A heavily synthesized voice scratches from the machine’s speaker. “Logs indicate lombax prisoner, approximately 155 centimeters tall, light primary fur color, in standard Megacorp jumpsuit. Lombax in approximate matching description found approaching Inventory.”

Angela sighs deeply. *Great. First Rusko, now this, and I still need to transmit that report to Chairman Dorn and Fizzwidget.* “Go down to maintenance.” The machine turns away and leaves, closing the door behind it. Angela takes in a deep breath, and slowly releases it. “Sorry, Ratchet. I forgot that you need to be logged in.”

“I’m fine.” Ratchet turns to the other lombax in the holding room. Ratchet says, with a smile, “Hey. I’m Ratchet. I tried to go down to inventory. What’re you in here for?”

Rusko sits down against a wall and looks away from Ratchet. A few seconds pass, and Rusko refuses to speak, though a quick glance betrays that he does acknowledge Ratchet’s presence.

“Ooooookay. Whatever.” Ratchet crosses his arms in confusion and irritation at Rusko’s behavior.

Angela rolls her eyes at Rusko's stubbornness. "Listen, Ratchet, I have a report to send to Worf Dorn, Chairman of Megacorp Security. Let's go. I'll log you in and then come get you in a few hours after I'm done working."

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Bogon, Endako Orbit. 10 December, 06:55 Standard Time

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"...no, that's fine. I read the report about Ratchet." Chairman Dorn grins with a hint of smugness. "After all, the Protopet Incident and your 'mystery thief' act is what caught my attention. You've been doing a damn fine job, by the way. Catching a saboteur on your first fleet escort, now there's an exciting first field assignment."

Dorn looks down and reaches for an e-pad just out of view of the camera. "I'll get to this report and check in with Fizzwidget. Keep on your toes, I have a special assignment I'm placing you on."

Cross nods. He had been threatening her with a 'special assignment' for three months, but so far she had been able to duck out of it. "Yes, sir. Security Chief Cross out." She taps a button and cuts the transmission. The Megacorp logo appears on the screen, but she's already stood up and heading for the door.

A few minutes later, Cross arrives at Inventory. The door opens and a trio of guards exit, each one pushing a cart with equipment packaged from Inventory. Cross waits for them to pass before she walks into the room.

"...so I give the plumber the Sewer Crystals I had collected on the way down. He takes them and takes a deep whiff before he says, 'Ahh, fresh from the bowels of a King Ameboid.' I'm trying desperately not to gag—" Ratchet abruptly ends his narrative to the human in charge of Inventory when he sees Cross, and a bright smile splits his excited expression. "Hey, Angela."

Cross is unable to keep a small smile from quirkling up onto her face. "You said you wanted me to see something?"

The human hastily walks to the nearest table and picks up the bulky pad. "I keep on telling you, it doesn't work. Nothing happens." He carefully hands it to Angela, and she takes the heavy thing.

The moment Angela's hands grasp the heavy pad, the screen lights up and a menu for "Project Ta'ree" appears in plain text. She opens the first item, a physiological report on the Ta'ree. Though very

human-like, the differences quickly strike out. Restructured, counter-standard collagen fibers allowing far greater flexibility, double myosin production in muscle tissue. Her eyes slowly widen in awe at the genetic work that must have been put into it. She goes back to the main menu and starts looking through the genetics, her eyes widening in wonder. The meticulous data, it makes her think of art instead of hard science. “This work is amazing—”

“Angela!” Ratchet’s shout grabs her attention and she almost jumps. ‘This is . . . Maybe we should start at the same place I did on the station.’ He walks around next to Angela so he can see the screen, then clears his throat and directs a command at the pad. “What does ‘Ta’ree’ mean?”

Ta’ree: conjunction of “Ta” meaning ‘advanced, great, superior, above’ and “Ree”, a derivation of colloquial “Rehee” or “Reh’ee” meaning “humans, the sentient species of Terra III”.

The inventory analyst stares in shock. *It only works when the lombaxes use it!*

Angela is not nearly so impressed. “What, that’s it? It just prints text, it doesn’t even have a holographic projector or speakers?”

Ratchet tosses an irritated glare at Angela, but redirects his attention to the pad. “What is project Ta’ree?”

When humans were discovered, they had a low compatibility with cybernetics. However, they also had a deeper connection to their seven senses.

“Seven senses? I’ve heard of ‘the Sixth Sense’, but I thought that was just a creepy movie.” The pad ignores her, continuing its text printout:

Lomba launched a project to make them more compatible, stronger, faster, smarter, more in tune with their senses. The operation was named Project Ta’ree.

Before Angela can voice her disappointment at the ‘primitive technology’, Ratchet speaks another command to the pad. “Show me.”

The data pad’s screen flickers, blinking black, white, then black again. Ratchet sees a small red light flare at one corner, indicating ‘working’. The old piece of equipment processes the request for a few seconds, then finishes linking the files. The screen flickers again, replaced by a grainy video of a primitive lombax ship approaching earth.

More short video clips play by, showing lomban ships abducting humans and forcing them into labs. It shows the abducted humans being tested on like lab rats. A few clips show lombax bureaucrats making grand plans with no idea what they were getting themselves into, and geneticists working with a frenzied glee on their unholy projects.

Angela lasts a few clips longer than Ratchet into the first horribly mutated results before she turns away looking sick. “Stop.”

The pad freezes and takes a few seconds to process the request before returning to a black screen with a blinking amber underscore.

Angela takes a few seconds to breathe. She shakes her head, as if to clear the disturbing images from their head, but fails. She puts her hand on her stomach and tries to quell the feeling that her breakfast is trying to come back up. “Ratchet? What was that?”

“That was what I found on the abandoned space station, it’s what I came to show you. Angela, is this real? Can this . . .?” Ratchet trails off.

Angela opens a menu and starts looking through some more of the data, though this time with a much different attitude. None of it seems faked; all of the genetics looks right. A sudden idea crosses her head and she looks up. With quick, measured steps, she marches out of Inventory and towards the holding cell. *Rusko was from Falnar Galaxy. He should know something about this if it’s real.* Ratchet follows, rather confused, with his own loping sort of jog.

A few minutes later, she arrives at the holding quarters. The guards open the door for her and she proceeds to Rusko’s room. Rusko looks up at her with curiosity as to why she has come to see him again. He finds out when Angela shoves the pad at him. “You never mentioned anything about this when you talked about the Ta’ree.”

Rusko stares away, refusing to make eye contact or take the pad. Angela drops it and the heavy object falls straight on his foot, making him shoot up with a snarl. He picks up the pad and barely takes enough time to read “Project Ta’ree” at the top before he tosses it back at Cross. The geneticist’s gaze bores into him. If looks could kill, Rusko’d be in mortal peril. Finally, he shrugs, as if trying to shunt off the looks Cross is sending at him. “It’s not exactly something we’re proud of.”

Ratchet balks. “You were a part of this?”

Rusko stands abruptly and snaps back, “It happened more than

1000 years ago!” Both Angela and Ratchet step back at the unexpected outburst, but Rusko continues. “The project was a mistake, but the Ta’ree use it day after day as an excuse to persecute us and shove us into gulags!”

“Gulags?”

Rusko makes a frustrated sound somehow like a cross between a roar and a sigh at Ratchet. Rusko had already explained it once. *This has to be some sick prank. Everyone knew about them in Falnar.* “Read my lips. Gu-lag: Death. Camp.”

Fortunately for the three and the escalating tempers, the door slides open and a human in a slightly sloppy Megacorp security uniform walks in to interrupt the fighting. “Chief Cross? We’re here for the saboteur, prisoner transfer to orbital prison AH-1701.”

Before Angela can respond, a rather loud ‘pop’ and then click emanates from her shoulder radio. “Chief Cross, you have a message from administrator Dorn. For your ears only.”

Angela sighs briefly. *Can’t say I’m not earning my pay.* “All right. You two go.” The lombax security chief points at the door. After a moment’s hesitation, Ratchet and Rusko both walk out. Angela reaches to her radio and clicks it to two-way mode. “Cross here, go ahead.”

She hears a chuckle on the other end. “Good morning, Chief Cross. I told you earlier that I’d have a new assignment for you. You’ve been assigned to the security detail protecting and testing Megacorp’s latest and greatest creation. I’d tell you more, but the project is classified, so you’ll have to come down. I’ll have a personal assistant waiting for you, he’ll give you the data. After you’re done reading over it, memorize the important information like the times and places, then erase it.”

“Understood. Cross out.”

13. Ratchet & Clank

Chapter 13: Ratchet & Clank

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Bogon, Megapolis on planet Endako. 10 December, 09:03 Standard Time

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A shuttle approaches a landing pad at one of the many spaceports of Megapolis. It passes through another cloud layer in the overcast sky hanging over the city. Massive buildings rise up from the lower clouds, spires gleaming in the occasional sunlight of the warm day.

Lines and lines of air-cars pass between the buildings in orderly streams. The shuttle curves gracefully around the air traffic to the landing pad. The curving, pointed craft comes to a momentary hover over the circular space as its landing thrusters flare downwards, bringing the white shuttle to a gentle landing. A click and a hiss later, the hatch on the side rotates open in two halves. The lower half extends a ramp down to the ground.

About ten humans in Megacorp uniforms march down the ramp, quickly heading into the space port and out of the way. Two lombaxes trail the eager group, both slow and thinking. Ratchet looks to Angela on his right and sees her staring at a data pad rather absently, her mind elsewhere. "So, chief. Why so glum?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm just a little . . . there's a lot going on."

"Tell me about it. I try sneaking out the back after Clank's premier movie for a vacation to get away from it all and I end up flying into a war zone and almost getting killed. Then I float back into the Bogon Galaxy." Ratchet pauses and notes that Angela doesn't smile, so he gets serious. "But really, what is it?"

Angela sighs and clicks the data pad off. "I'm just worried about Rusko." Angela takes a breath as if she was about to continue, but instead her eyes just look blankly at the ground.

Ratchet waits for politeness' sake, then hesitantly ventures, "How come? I mean, all I know is you caught him for sabotage."

Angela glances up and takes a right turn on the huge elevated walkways, turning towards a large spaceport building. "I placed him on twenty-four hour suicide watch." Ratchet's eyes widen in surprise, Angela doesn't notice and keeps talking, 'I'm the only one he'll talk to, and now Dorn is giving me a new assignment. I've been busy the past few weeks, I wouldn't mind a bit of a break, and . . . if I can help out Rusko . . .' The Grelbinian lombax sighs. *I know he's telling the truth, and I have to help him, but I don't know how.* "He's been through enough with his family and all."

A new voice intrudes on the conversation. "Security Chief Cross!" A lombax in a new Megacorp Tetrafiber Armor uniform snaps to attention, holding a perfect salute to Angela.

Angela sends an irritated gaze towards the newcomer standing in front of the spaceport building entrance. "Can I help you?"

The lombax in gray armor drops his salute and hands a thick data pad to Angela. "Technical Sergeant Felix, I'm the assistant of Megacorp Security Chairman Dorn. I'm here to escort you to the site and grant you Level Six-Delta clearance so you can work on the . . ." Felix pauses and glances at Ratchet, ". . . project Dorn assigned you to."

Angela nods and takes the pad. "I'll just be a minute. Come on, Ratchet. You still have to meet that surprise person."

She heads into the bustling spaceport terminal building at a jog, Ratchet following close behind. After a moment, they arrive at the check-out. Ratchet, knowing that his things are being delivered to his apartment elsewhere in the city, shows his impatience. "Who is it that'd so totally surprise me? I mean, after all the things in the — Clank! I don't believe it!"

"Ratchet! It is good to see you. You seem to have come out of surgery well enough."

Ratchet stands up and raises an eyebrow as he sends a questioning look at Angela.

She smiles and gives a short, nervous laugh. "What? You had been in surgery for hours and the medical staff wouldn't let me see you until the next day."

Ratchet waves off her apprehensive behavior, reading between the lines that she had been fretting about him. "Ah, whatever. So, Clank, how've things been?"

"Aside from the Solona Galaxy remaining a relative mess, the

universe seems to have held itself together in your absence.” Clank gives a look at Ratchet that would have been clearly been a light jeer on an organic being. Ratchet chuckles. “Since you went to the Dagon Sector for your little ‘retreat’, there has been quite a bit going on.”

Angela’s eyes snap to Clank when he mentions ‘Dagon Sector’, then drift to Ratchet and a look the Veldinian assumes is disappointment flashes through her eyes, with a hint of pity. Clank and Angela look back and forth at each other for a moment and Angela sighs. “Fine, I’ll say it. I got a message a few days ago. The rangers at Solana were trying to get ahold of you. A day later, the news came out and I figured out why . . .” Angela trails off and her eyes drift down, betraying that she isn’t sure she wants to continue but there is more left to say.

Clank taps his fingers together, trying to think, and decides to bite the bullet. “Ratchet, shortly after you disappeared, a wormhole was discovered in the Dagon Sector. The Galactic Peacekeepers detected activity and sent the *Phoenix* to investigate.” He holds out his hands and a sad expression crosses his titanium features. “The *Phoenix* was attacked and destroyed.”

“The *Phoenix*? But . . . the whole Q-Force was on the *Phoenix* . . .” Ratchet’s ears curl down in what is disturbingly like Rusko’s virtually permanent melancholy appearance.

Angela looks sympathetically at Ratchet. She rests a friendly hand on his shoulder, but Ratchet doesn’t seem to be aware. Clank taps on Angela’s knee to get her attention. “Perhaps later would be a better time for conversation. If you could stop by later for . . .?”

Angela nods. “Sure. I’ll stop by some time tomorrow morning.”

...

Bogon, near Megapolis on planet Endako. 10 December, 09:46
Standard Time

...

Angela looks around the hangar complex from the passenger seat of the little personnel transport cart. The fortress-like Megacorp facility beyond the outskirts of Megapolis is the new location of Megacorp’s secret new project. She reads her new data pad as Felix continues driving.

Project Banshee: Nicknamed a ‘pocket warship’ by the personnel involved in the project, the *Banshee* is the most heavily armed space craft of its size — or anything many times bigger —

in the known universe.

Angela looks up from the report and snickers to herself. *I wonder if this is because of the rumors that Solona's Gagetron is edging for a monopoly on personnel guns. Or the rumor that Tak'sen won't buy our sidearm weapons.*

The cart goes over a bump, making the vehicle lurch and sending a strong jolt through Angela. She re-adjusts her grip on the pad and continues reading.

The *Banshee* is capable of atmospheric as well as interstellar flight, including a dedicated CLASSIFIED Drive. CLASSIFIED. It requires a minimal crew of one, and can function at optimal parameters with a full crew of five personnel. CLASSIFIED. Spartan facilities are on board for possible extended trips, including two individual bunks in a soundproofed room with an enhanced dampening field.

The report starts getting into technical aspects of the ship, including its engines and power systems. What little Angela understands seems rather boring, but machines are not exactly her forte. That and the fact that it seems every other number and many of the words are replaced with an ugly "classified" block. After a while, it gets into the weaponry. The section is absurdly short, consisting of a several "classified" blocks that she assumes covers the whole section.

She sighs and is about to ask if they've arrived yet when the cart pulls to a stop. "Here it is." She looks up at Felix's voice to see a massive hangar looming ahead.

The structure has a cylindrical core rising up into the open air, a no-fly zone keeping the skies above the entire fortress area clear. Branching out in the four directions from the core section are four half-cylinder hangars with massive clamshell doors. The facility is a combination of carbonox-reinforced concrete and tetrafiber alloy. *They certainly don't want anybody breaking into this place.*

Angela's eyes busily dart back and forth as she tries to take in the size. The height of the hangar doors alone have to be at least forty meters, with double that in width. Felix's voice again breaks her out of her thoughts. "This way, Chief Cross."

They walk for a few minutes along the circumference of the huge doors. Angela looks at the ground but sees no signs of any massive track, the hangar doors look perfectly flush with the ground, so there is no chance of something slipping in or out. The beeping of a security keypad grabs her attention. They've reached a windowless door,

shaped like a square three meters by three meters. Felix finishes punching in the security code and a low, rumbling hum begins to emanate from the ground beneath the door.

The door begins to slide straight out of the building, and Angela quickly decides that it must be a heavy blast door. The door slides almost a quarter meter out of the hangar before it stops and then begins to rotate on a vertical hinge, swinging open. The simple process of opening takes almost a full minute before Felix can walk through.

Angela follows him inside the gargantuan structure. "I assume that I'm going to have an office somewhere around here?"

Felix nods. "Somewhere in Megapolis, I would guess, but nobody ever told me specifically. Must be waiting in your e-mail."

Angela rolls her eyes and follows him into a short, narrow hallway of bare concrete. At the end, next to a titanium-carbonox door, sits another security station complete with keypad and retinal scanner. Felix pauses at it and leans forward, looking at the target point in the retinal scanner. After a brief scan, he stands back and blinks, trying to make his pupils constrict faster. The blast door leading to the outside closes, and after its locks clack shut the steel door at the other end of the hallway quickly slides sideways.

Felix steps into a spacious hallway beyond the door, but stops a pace out of the door. He reaches to a wheeled tray and picks up the pad resting on top. "Here. This one has the data filled out according to your new Level 6D security clearance." Angela hands it to him and begins skimming. Felix sets the old one down on a shelf inside.

"What exactly does Megacorp need with a 'pocket warship'? This thing has enough weaponry to knock out a capital ship by itself, maybe even take on a whole fleet."

Felix shrugs. "I dunno, my security clearance is only 6B. I was here to oversee the assembly. You have to oversee the beta trials."

"The beta what?"

Felix chuckles to himself and opens the next door in their way. The titanium-carbonox slab slides to the side. "Sorry, Chief Cross, I forgot that you just got here. That's been technician-speak for its 'shakedown' flights. We need to test it with everything hooked in and on to make sure that it's as effective as simulations predict. If you've read your mission statement, you get to hand pick your test crew." Felix smiles suggestively, as if he could make it any clearer that he

wants to be on that crew.

Angela's eyes narrow a little. "I'll have to think about it." *I'm an okay pilot, but I'm not exactly an ace test flier. Flying a ship is completely different from a hover-glider.*

Felix, since he is still leading the way, opens the last door. Beyond lies the interior of the gargantuan hangar itself. The sprawling facility looks even more massive on the inside than on the outside. The area is brightly lit, but the space is so high that she can't even see the ceiling.

The hangar buzzes with activity. Large, yellow, hovering cranes lift plates into place. The center of the hangar is taken up largely with heavy lifters and other bulky equipment. Angela has to blink at the ship. From its firepower, she expected something enormous looming in the hangar. Though the ship would dwarf the standard Megacorp star-fighter, at least triple the size of a Manta, it is remarkably compact.

The outer hull is gray, but instead of the efficient gunmetal gray of most military ships she's seen, this one is a strange mottled pastel gray that makes her eyes slide away from it, as if it were partially invisible. The ship is sleek, as if it was designed to swim as much as fly. Its central body is faintly ellipsoidal, a nose thrusting aggressively forward, tipped by a chain-gun turret of some kind that is currently extended and being examined by maintenance robots.

Expanding gracefully from the sides are what her manual coldly called 'weapons wings'. True, they are packed with weapons, but they almost seem to flow, as if the ship would take off and flap (or swim) away at any moment. Rather than simply tapering to a sharp edge at the wingtips, a curving, bulb-shaped pod flows from the wings. These pods hold even more weaponry. Angela glances back at her pad. *Yep, I'm definitely gonna need help with this ship.*

14. The Fifth Man

Chapter 14: The Fifth Man

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Bogon, Megapolis on planet Endako. 10 December, 19:14 Standard Time

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“...he won’t eat a thing, he won’t drink, and he hasn’t made so much as a peep of noise since he was transferred from the freighter. He also completely ignores everything we say. A couple of the guards have gotten so frustrated that they’ve considered getting zap prods.”

Angela freezes mid-stride and the human security officer also stops. Angela slowly turns to him, not bothering to hide the fury on her face. “If you or any of your staff *dare* insinuate that they consider using ‘pain sticks’, you will have to *personally* answer to me.”

The human holds up his hands in surrender, still cringing pathetically, “They didn’t really mean it! The thing is, he’s being really uncooperative. It’s more like handling an angry prisoner of war than a Megacorp employee who got caught screwing something up.”

Megacorp employee . . . ? Don’t they know we caught him for sabotage? Angela sighs and decides they must not have read the report *again*.

They reach the door to the isolation wing where prisoners are held. The human stops and slides his keycard through the reader beside the door. It opens and the plexiglass door slides open. Beyond lie dozens of floors of rows on rows of holding cells. In primitive planets, these cells would be sealed off with metal bars. Here, a much more boring but effective system of plexiglass with energy force-fields on standby are utilized.

“Here we go. Cell number 42.” The human slides his card down and the cell door slides open.

Rusko cracks an eye open and flicks an ear towards the door. As Angela watches him stand up, she notes that his ears are curled down in a lombax expression of sadness, of utter despair. *Come to think of it, his ears have always been like that.* Angela turns around and gestures for

the human to leave. He rolls his eyes, a little annoyed at having to hand over his prisoner to Angela, but he defers to her greater rank. The door slides shut and he steps to the side, just out of view.

“I’ve been seeing a lot of you lately. I wonder why.”

Angela turns crossly to the lombax prisoner. “Rusko, it’s against Megacorp regulations to allow a prisoner to starve himself to death. From what they tell me, you’d stop breathing if you could.”

Rusko doesn’t answer, and an extremely unnerving silence begins to grow.

Angela looks up, as if she might see an answer on the ceiling, then back to Rusko. “Ever since we found you trying to blow up the convoy, you’ve been nothing but trouble. Why couldn’t you have chosen a simpler path? Something more peaceful?”

Rusko looks at Angela through eyes narrowed to slits. “What do you expect me to do? You wonder why I was trying to blow up that ship? Why I didn’t try some ‘diplomatic channels’ to fix my damned life? I’ve only been good at two things. Flying and blowing stuff up.”

Angela sighs and places her right hand over her eyes. “And what am I supposed to do about . . .?” A beat passes, and then her eyes open. *You get to hand pick your test crew . . .* “How good a pilot are you?”

Rusko turns up his nose, as if Angela had insulted his skills. “The best. There isn’t anything I can’t fly. I was so good that Stelcorp even hounded me until I worked for ’em. It’s run by Ta’ree, *that’s* how good I am.”

Angela mutters, “Maybe there *is* something I can do. Try to keep out of trouble, I’ll be back tomorrow.”

...

Bogon, Megapolis on planet Endako. 11 December, 05:55 Standard Time

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The door to Ratchet and Clank’s apartment slides open. Clank looks up at the visitor, rather surprised. “Miss Cross, I did not expect to see you so early. Ratchet is not even awake yet.”

Angela steps inside. “Actually, I didn’t want to talk to just him. How are you at . . . interfacing with security systems? Perhaps like . . . modifying personnel records.”

Clank looks up at Angela suspiciously for a few seconds, and then a mischievous grin crosses his metal face. “I am . . .” Clank examines the back of his hand, rather clearly showing off, “. . . rather skilled. May I ask the occasion?”

Angela glances around nervously, then checks to make sure that the door is closed. It automatically slid shut behind her, so the two are alone in the room. She kneels down closer to him and whispers, “I need you to hack Rusko into the Megacorp personnel files.”

Clank rubs his hands together. “Ooh, a challenge. This should be quite fun.” Clank laughs to himself, his green eyes glowing merrily with the promise of sneaking through Megacorp’s cybernet.

Angela stands up. Clank looks back at the doorway to the bedroom where Ratchet is currently sleeping. Angela follows his gaze, then softly asks, “How’s he been doing?”

Clank’s hands drop to his polished titanium sides and looks back at Angela. “He just learned that he lost a number of his friends, and though he may try to pretend that he is unconcerned that Captain Qwark is gone, I think he feels some guilt. He’s been avoiding the issue, but I think that some action should help him.”

Angela walks to the couch and sits down. Clank joins her, sitting on the opposite end. After pondering for a moment, Clank speaks again, “You said you were putting together a crew. I assume you mean for some sort of test space craft?” Angela nods. “Ratchet is a skilled pilot, and his talent with weaponry is unmatched.”

A yawn from the bedroom door draws her attention. Ratchet’s standing there, wearing a wrinkled flight suit he undoubtedly slept in. “Hey, Angela. What’re you doing here so early in the morning?”

“Say, Ratchet. I’ve got a ship I need to put through a good shakedown cruise. How would you like to help out?”

...

Bogon, near Megapolis on planet Endako. 11 December, 07:41
Standard Time

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“I still can’t believe the size Megacorp builds their stuff with. This reminds me when I first saw the *Phoenix*.” Ratchet stops talking. The loss he feels is evident, but the last time either Angela or Clank tried to offer words of condolences they were brusquely blown off.

Rusko notices Ratchet’s cessation of speech, and he quirks an

eyebrow. However, he does not say anything — either because he can't think of something consoling since he doesn't know Ratchet, or he is simply continuing to be silent in public.

The cart jolts as it races over a speed bump. All three lombaxes re-adjust their grip on whatever they are holding on to, since the tiny vehicle has no seat restraints. Angela takes a turn and the hangar rises into view. Rusko gawks and Ratchet quietly takes in the impressive sight. After a minute of driving across the sprawling paved space, they arrive at the hangar building itself, just in front of the same door Felix led Angela through.

The four hop off the cart and proceed through the hangar facility. As before, the *Banshee* patiently waits in the hangar proper. By now, the last finishing touches have been completed, so no bulky, yellow equipment blots the view of the *Banshee*. Ratchet looks over it critically for a moment and nods in approval. “Nice. This thing looks way better than my Megacorp Manta.”

Angela pauses at the ramp extending from the ‘neck’ of the ship. “Well, let’s get going. Everything’s been installed, all that’s left are live-fire exercises and the full shakedown. It’s on minimal settings now for the first flight, but that shouldn’t be a problem.”

Clank is the first one to head up the ramp, his titanium feet making a soft ‘clink’ with every step up the metal ramp. Ratchet walks behind him, followed by Rusko and Angela. The four step into the cockpit and notice a curious thing: the lights in the ship are dark. Clank looks around, then points, “What are you doing here?”

The three lombaxes look towards the forward chair that Clank gestured to. A dark figure sits in it, the shadows and chair entirely concealing his form. The figure reaches forward and presses a button in the controls. The button lights what appears a very bright blue in the dim light, and the lights activate.

Ratchet and Rusko both blink and hold up their hands to shield their eyes from the sudden change in light intensity. Angela squints for a moment but keeps her eyes on the unknown figure. She sees faintly familiar lombax ears, but before she can say anything, the chair turns around.

“Felix!”

“Hello, Chief Cross. Planning on going somewhere?”

Angela narrows her eyes at his threatening tone. “Are you insinuating something?”

Felix shrugs, the gesture smug and flaunting. “It’s a little strange to load cargo onto a prototype vessel before live-fire exercises.” Felix steepled his fingers and bores his gaze straight at Angela. “There is also the . . . question about your crew.”

Angela crosses her arms and continues to glare. “What question? I have a pilot and weaponry officer. Clank is here for communications. As I recall, since I am the commander, I have prerogative — even the expectation — to be on the ship during exercises.”

Felix interlaces his fingers and drops his hands to his lap. “Yes, and of course there is *nothing* suspicious about your pilot. But what about a chief engineer?”

Silence stretches for a long second. Ratchet notices that Angela doesn’t look like she’s going to respond, and Rusko is still silently evaluating the new lombax, so the hero of two galaxies meekly asks, “About the cargo . . .”

“Such as items like personal weaponry and armor? I know you’re up to something. This ship has been my life for the past three years. I practically built it with my own hands. Imagine my surprise when I find out that it’s being prepped for the shakedown cruises and I wasn’t informed.” Felix sends a hard, accusing look at Angela. “Or when I personally check the cargo to see it looks like someone’s getting ready to go to war. And the paperwork for your picks are . . . rather unusual, Chief Cross.”

Clank, having patiently and attentively watched the conversation, now decides to enter it. “You know that this is not exclusively about final testing of the vessel. However, you have not reported anything yet. Our goal is only one of rescue.”

Felix doesn’t bother to hide the suspicion and disbelief. A snide, “Oh really?” escapes.

Rusko, having been quietly watching Felix, finally is fed up. “I don’t care about how long you’ve been on this stupid project. This is about my family.”

Felix unclasps his hands and looks at the long-striped lombax. “Oh, don’t act like you’re the only one who’s ever lost anything. My sister and two uncles were killed in Allgon City in the Protopet ‘incident’. I can’t let my personal feelings dictate—”

“All I have *are* my personal feelings!”

Clank taps his chin, thinking quickly. “Two years ago, there was nothing you could do to save your sister from the Protopets. The fate

of Rusko's family is uncertain. In this we have a chance."

Felix looks suspiciously at them, but a discerning eye could see that his resolve is wearing. "What exactly happened?"

Angela glances briefly at Rusko. A few seconds pass and he tries to wait, as if doing so might be enough to change Felix's mind and make him go away. Felix's eyes bore into Rusko, the engineer's resolve starting to harden again. Realizing that Felix will either stop them or help them, the Falnarian lombax sighs. "I was suspected of having ties to the resistance against the Ta'ree. They couldn't find anything solid enough to bring me to one of their show-trials, so they abducted my wife and daughter. All I could think about since then is getting them back."

Felix steeples his fingers again, his eyes dropping as he thinks deeply. He seems to come to a stalemate in his thinking, because he says nothing for several long seconds. Angela decides that they have nothing to lose, so she adds her side. "Megacorp's contract with the Ta'ree isn't supplying them with peace-keeping police units, it's supplying them in a war. Against lombaxes. Rusko's family was abducted by the Ta'ree and taken to concentration camps. Some of the 'police' forces were Megacorp. As Megacorp employees, if we don't do something to stop this then we're condoning it."

Finally, he seems to come to a decision. "Righting a wrong. What might I have done if I had the chance..." *What might my sister want me to do? What would I have done if it was her back against the Protopets?* He looks back up at the group. "I'm in."

Angela uncrosses her arms and sighs lightly. "Felix, you have no idea what you're getting into. I don't know if you can handle what might—"

"No! You need me!" Felix leans forward, the aggressive posture clearly indicating that he will not back down. "This is a prototype ship, *my* ship, and I am the only expert on it."

Clank interjects before an argument can start, because it is clear that Rusko is against Felix's involvement. "He does have a point. As it currently stands, we have proficiencies in weaponry and communications, but we have no engineer. It would not be likely that he would be in our way, and he could very likely come in helpful."

Ratchet shrugs, accepting Clank's logic. Rusko stubbornly stands, arms crossed, against the idea. Felix waits expectantly. Angela ponders carefully for a few seconds. "There's no turning back. This is the point of no return. We're going to Falnar, and I don't know what we're

going to run into there.”

“I don’t care. This is my ship, and I’m going to take care of her no matter where she goes.”

Angela crosses her arms and taps her arm as she thinks. She uncrosses them and says, “Fine. Everybody get strapped in. We’re taking off. Rusko, set a course for the wormhole to Falnar.”

15. Welcome to Falnar

Chapter 15: Welcome to Falnar

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Bogon, Ratatosk System in the Igdrasil Sector. 11 December, 08:32
Standard Time

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The wormhole to the Falnar Galaxy sits lonely in space on the outskirts of the Ratatosk System. The small, blue anomaly rotates, a peaceful spot among the vast black and pinpricks of light. A relatively short distance away burns the star of the Ratatosk System, a blue dwarf. Four planets rotate around the star. The inner two, almost invisible in the distance, are terrestrial. The outer two are jovians, massive gas giants of swirling storms and numerous moons.

In a bright, twisting flash, the *Banshee* drops out of warp. Its sublight engines light with a flare, thrusting the vessel smoothly but quickly forward. On board, the crew is still marveling over the tiny warship. The flight itself was extremely rapid. Once the *Banshee* was cleared to leave Endako, the Graviton Warp Drive brought the ship to the wormhole in mere minutes.

Ratchet and Clank sit at the weapons station, reading the report for the ship on the data pad Angela had. "Hull-following, self-regenerative shields. Not yet tested at full power with full system compliment." He goes silent and his robot companion reads to a set of numbers a few lines down.

Clank points at the strength rating. "This must be a mistake. The gigawatt rating on the shield tolerances seems to have at least an extra digit."

Angela is busy looking over star charts at her station near the middle of the compact 'bridge'. Without looking away from the charts, she throws over her shoulder, "Nope, that's right. It's just using new shield technology. You want to see something really surprising? Check out the armor."

Ratchet scrolls down. Clank sees the armor first. "A new homogenous composite utilizing honeycombed formations of

rarity, Duramaxium and Carbonox in the most powerful ablative hull armor ever created. The armor itself is shaped from a quantum-computed macro-geometrical level down to the molecular level to deflect the majority of projectile damage. Although limited by its size, this vessel is certainly designed to be resilient.”

Rusko, who had been diligently and silently piloting from his spot at the front of the bridge, mentions, “Who cares about that? This thing flies like a dream. I can’t remember the last time it was so easy to pull off a rocker. I bet I could fly circles around those damned mantas.”

The wormhole flares, and the view screen automatically darkens the wormhole to protect the crew’s eyes. A subtle jostle runs through the ship as it passes the event horizon of the spatial anomaly, and then everything is calm again as the *Banshee* passes through the wormhole’s throat. Another jounce and the compact warship exits the anomaly in the Falnar Galaxy.

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Falnar Galaxy, Bifrost Sector. 11 December, 08:33 Standard Time

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As soon as the *Banshee* exits the wormhole’s event horizon, about half of the workstation in front of Rusko goes dark. “Uh-oh. What was that?”

Cross is still recovering from the flight through the wormhole. “Oh, wow. That was amazing.” Angela looks around a few times, and notices that the two other lombaxes on the bridge aren’t gaping, staring in awe, or otherwise acting impressed with the wormhole. “What, am I the only one who’s never been through a wormhole before?”

Rusko keeps his eyes forward on the controls and view screen as he answers, “I’ve been through wormholes dozens of times. They’re a lot more prolific in Falnar than most other galaxies. Remember, I used to pilot for Stelcorp.” He glances at the flickering workstation ahead of him, but has no idea why it suddenly decided to start acting so sporadically.

A few gray-painted Megacorp-built ships move into view. Before Angela can ask Ratchet, a blinking light at Clank’s station draws her attention.

“We are receiving an audio-only transmission.” Clank hits the button.

“Lombax vessel, this is a restricted area! No ships are authorized to pass through this area. Surrender and prepare to be boarded.” The signal cuts with a click.

Rusko speaks with a sardonic tone, “And that would be the Ta’ree introduction to the Bifrost Sector. Welcome to Falnar.” He grips the dual control joysticks and twists. The *Banshee* whips a precise 90 degrees to port and slides in that direction. A missile races past on the view screen, narrowly missing the ship’s body.

Ratchet straightens up in his seat and activates the defenses. A moment passes and then several blue-white pulses appear on the hull. The pulses spread across the hull, forming a skin-tight shield in less than a second. “Shields and... point defense? Now that’s a concept. I wonder what it’s got.” He enters an activation command, and the console bleeps negatively at him, the readout displaying: ‘Equipment untested with full system suite, can not activate in stage four’. *That’s not good.*

Angela taps at the controls on her station. “Sensors pick up two cruisers, one of them looks like a missile cruiser.”

Clank hops up to the communications station wedged into the back of the bridge and begins busily hitting buttons. “I will see what I can do about jamming them. There is a lot of comm chatter, but it is all encrypted.”

One of the screens at Angela’s station begins flashing with new approaching triangles on a simplified tactical map. “A carrier is deploying Megacorp Mantas. Thirty of them, coming fast.” The female lombax looks at the screen with increasing numbers of red hostiles appearing. “Why are we gearing up to fight right away?”

Rusko jerks the control stick right and a small flurry of missiles pass by. “Those are the Ta’ree. In case you haven’t guessed, they hate lombaxes. You don’t even want to hear half of the stories I’ve heard of what happened to lombaxes on ships they’ve boarded.” The ship shakes under the impact of several missiles, and he asks, “Could anyone tell me why the warp won’t activate?”

Angela returns her focus to the sensors. “They’ve got a dampening field, it’s preventing the drive from creating a stable warp field. More ships incoming; they must have a whole fleet here!”

The shields absorb the impact of several strafing runs from the Ta’ree Manta-class star-fighters, single-engine variants of the ship Megacorp gave Ratchet. Rusko jukes the *Banshee* to one side and whips the agile pocket warship around.

Ratchet, handling tactical, engages the first weapon he sees. Six powerful phase-pulse cannons, three in each wing, open fire in rapid succession. The star-fighters, while of relatively sturdy Megacorp construction, quickly crumple under the *Banshee's* thundering fire. Eight break apart in subdued explosions and the rest scatter.

“The missile cruiser is opening fire!”

Clank continues rapidly tapping at the communications station. “I am working on it, the missiles appear to use an encrypted, dual bypass transceivers. It is harder to jam them than I thought.”

Ratchet squeezes the trigger for the primary weapons again and the pulse cannons erupt in blue-tinged-purple energy fire. Another two star-fighters blast apart before he lets up. The missiles enter range and the *Banshee's* alarms blare, the point-defense still refusing to activate despite the incoming projectiles.

More red squares enter Angela's tactical display as the ship shudders from missile hits. “Two destroyers and a frigate are incoming. We need to get out of here—!”

The *Banshee* rocks and Rusko snaps back, “As soon as the Graviton Warp Drive starts working, Cross! All I can do is keep flying until we get out of the dampening field.”

A series of heavier blows shake the *Banshee* as the frigate enters range. The destroyers break away and curve around to approach the pocket warship from different directions as the fighters continue to pelt the lombax ship with laser fire.

Rusko whips the ship around and jukes to one side to try to evade the particle accelerator fire from the frigate. “Ratchet! Take out the destroyer!”

Ratchet nods and centers the cross-hairs on the vessel, a rather bulbous ship about a third larger than the *Banshee*. Blue-tinged-purple fire leaps from the vulcan cannons on the *Banshee's* wings into the destroyer. Its shields shudder for a few seconds, then collapse. Ratchet tries to fire a barrage of missiles, but the workstation bleeps negatively at him and he holds down the pulse-cannons, using volume to blast the destroyer open. The pulse cannons reduce the Ta'ree vessel to debris and Rusko flies the *Banshee* straight through it.

More laser fire from the fighters rakes across the *Banshee*. Ratchet turns his head to shout at Rusko, “Are you gonna do something about those fighters?”

Another series of guided missiles from the Ta'ree missile cruiser

streak at the *Banshee*. Quick evasive maneuvers dodge a few, the remaining inflict a harsh jolt when they explodes on the shields.

“Shields down to 38 percent! Rusko, we need to get out of here!” As if on cue from Angela’s shout, the ship shudders as it takes the impact from a couple of torpedoes launched from the fighters.

“I can—” Before Rusko can finish the negative, about a dozen colors across his and Angela’s workstations change. “We’re out of the dampening field. Engaging warp!”

16. Insurgents

Chapter 16: Insurgents

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Moksha System. 11 December, 12:39 Standard Time

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A flash of light appears in the busy region of space of the Moksha system. The *Banshee* streaks out of warp, returning to real space in the final jump of the complicated, roundabout path Rusko took to be sure they shook off Ta'ree pursuit.

The Moksha system is filled with natural hazards. Four jovians rotate far from the sun, each with at least a dozen moons and their own asteroid belts. A thick asteroid belt separates those from the inner system of a tiny gas planet, and two terrestrial planets. Asteroids of varying sizes and shapes clutter the system, making navigation difficult for the best of pilots.

The jovian dwarf planet at the outer edge of the inner system has three huge moons and several asteroid rings. The jovian itself rotates so quickly the atmosphere appears to have a milky, perfect uniformity, broken occasionally by the storms intense enough to disrupt the super-gale winds of rotation. Two of its three moons have atmospheres, and are pockmarked by asteroid impacts. One is large enough to have a merely frigid, wintry surface. The other is little more than a glacial ball of rock surrounded by a perpetual blizzard.

The next planet in is a terrestrial planet, big enough to have an atmosphere, but not a significant one. It also is cold, with occasional sheltered pockets of dense forest. The innermost planet is large and close enough to the sun to gain significant heat, and while it necessarily has complicated asteroid belts it lacks any true moons.

Rusko spends hours expertly weaving through the asteroids cluttering the system. Angela tries to scan the system, but the sensors are quickly confused by the masses of moving objects and the mysterious disruption effect of most of the asteroids. *I can guess why we'd come here to hide from the Ta'ree. The Banshee may not have the best sensors, but even an MSA would go crazy trying to find a ship in here.*

Clank, who had been quiet and busy going over the sensor readings, apparently decides to give up on making heads or tails of the sensors. “This is certainly an interesting destination. May I inquire as to what this place is called?”

Rusko keeps his attention firmly on the screens ahead of him, his hands tightly gripping the controls. As he weaves towards the second planet of the innermost jovian, he answers, “This is the Moksha system. It’s a real hell for most guys to try to fly through, even worse to search. The asteroids around here are rich in all these weird ores. Raritaranium, uniliquin, other stuff I can’t pronounce. Screws up the sensors real bad, which is why the resistance has several bases here. There’s a base on this moon. We can link up, try to unlock a few of the Banshee’s functions, check for repairs.”

Ratchet turns his seat around and watches the almost random paths through the asteroids. “Man, this would be so much fun to fly through.”

Rusko forces a bitter half-smile. “That’s exactly what I thought when I first came here. Me and the guys would have contests to see how far or long we could fly through here before getting hit by an asteroid.”

The rear door of the bridge-like cockpit slides open and Felix walks in, chest puffed out and a smug look on his face. “What’d I tell ya? Is this not the greatest ship you ever flew in?”

Rusko ignores the engineer’s entrance. Angela and Ratchet simultaneously roll their eyes, but give the obligatory “uh-huh” to keep him from rambling. Fortunately, it works and he stands next to Clank since the four chairs are all occupied. “What happened, did we fly into a planet explosion? I’ve never seen such a mess.”

A few screens at communications begin to flicker with not quite random reception. Clank enters a few commands before he states, “I believe that we are receiving a transmission. Give me a few moments to decrypt the channel.”

Clank rapidly goes through several decryptions before locking down the signal channel. A face appears on one of the screens at comm, though the lighting is so dark the only thing Clank can tell is that the figure appears to be a lombax. It shifts as if speaking, and a quarter second delay later an androgynous, mechanically synthesized voice begins. “Unknown vessel. Weapons have been locked on. Land in primary port. Approach zulu foxtrot bravo.”

“This is Rusko, Kel’no’reem shadowkhan, confirming orders. Taking

approach zulu foxtrot bravo to primary port.”

...

Moksha System. 11 December, 18:21 Standard Time

...

A cold wind blows across the wide, semi-circular opening of the large hangar. The *Banshee* drops straight through the atmosphere and stops with perfect precision exactly at the height to fly through the opening built into the coast cliff-side hangar. Rusko has to slowly bring the *Banshee* in. Despite being a wonderfully maneuverable ship, the *Banshee* is still larger than a star-fighter, and wide enough that the weapon pods on the wingtips nearly graze the opening.

After touching down, a blocky, rectangular door slides over the entrance. Inside the bridge, Rusko twirls the seat around and is about to stand up when he sees that the others still haven't gotten up yet. He gestures for them to get up and out of his way. Clank, sitting at communications at the back of the bridge, easily hops off the chair and exits the room.

Ratchet, in the second seat from the front, stands up and walks to the door at the back of the slightly cramped bridge. Unfortunately, the confines of the space combine with Angela's slightly bad timing as she stands up from the third station from the front, and he crashes right into her, knocking both of them to the ground.

Angela grits her teeth and blushes under her fur at the slightly compromising-looking position the two have fallen into. *Great, now I probably look like a clumsy idiot. This only seems to happen when Ratchet's around. First on Tabora, then my home on Grelbin.*

Ratchet is also blushing furiously under his fur. He scrambles up off Angela, but before he can stutter an apology and make himself any more embarrassed, Rusko interjects, tapping his foot in impatience. “Can we please stop tripping over each other and just get out of here?”

The three lombaxes step off the bridge and walk down the exit hatch just as Felix arrives from the engine section at the back of the ship. At the bottom of the ramp, Clank is talking to a short lombax with extremely dark brown-mottled-gray fur.

“I am not sure which system you mean by ‘Zebini’, but I am not familiar with this galaxy, and the *Banshee* does not contain star charts for any of Falnar except what we flew through.”

The lombax nods. “I’ll see what I can do about getting you a set of Falnar star charts, we just got a signal from our spies, so we’ve got some updating to do. Well, this ship’s a real work of art. What’s its top speed?”

Felix is about to brag about some estimated top speed that the Graviton Warp Drive can be pushed to, but Rusko speaks first. “I managed to push it above warp factor 17 on the way here. It only took a few hours to get here from the Bifrost Sector.”

“Hours? That’s impossible, even with a stolen Gravimetric Warp Drive you’d have to make a beeline straight to here from the wormholes in Bifrost.” The short, dark lombax turns to send a rather hard look at Rusko.

Rusko holds up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “I took the long route, Kanna, don’t worry. The *Banshee* is equipped with a ‘Graviton Warp Drive’ that can go faster than anything ever invented before. That thing can even go into warp in the stratosphere. Doesn’t seem to have the long-term endurance of a Gravimetric Warp Drive, though.” Rusko puts his hands down. “Listen, we’re just here for supplies and info. Could we check out the raid shack—?”

Felix seems to choose that moment to reach a fisted right hand high and stretch as he yawns, his mouth opening wide. Rusko suppresses the urge to grab Felix by the tongue and drag him out of the room for interrupting him.

“You all must be tired. I’ll see what I can do about getting you some room in the sleeping quarters. First, let’s go to debriefing. After you’re rested, I’ll come get you and show you to the raid shack.”

...

Moon Base, Moksha System. 12 December, 01:19 Standard Time

...

Ratchet slowly wakes, noticing that it seems slightly cooler than his apartment in Megapolis. His eyes slowly crack open and he sees the bottom of a simple bunk above him. *What the heck?* He rubs his eyes, but the bunk is still there.

Slowly, Ratchet sits up. He is on the bottom bunk in what appears to be a room crammed with triple bunks, the ceiling just ten centimeters from the top bunks. Now his memory starts to return, and he recalls that he is in the Falnar Galaxy. Many of the crude beddings are occupied, most by lombaxes but one or two with humans.

Ratchet looks to the bunk beside him to see Rusko, who took the bottom bunk near his. However, the Falnarian isn't sleeping like everyone was supposed to be. Instead, he is sitting on the edge of his bunk, facing away from Ratchet, holding an open locket in his fingers.

Ratchet's curiosity gets the better of him, and he leans a little to better see the pictures on the inside of the locket. On the left are two people, a beautiful woman and a child not quite six years old. The child's eyes are closed, her face frozen forever in a laugh. On the right side is the young lombax girl again, but this time her eyes are open and Ratchet can see the vibrant violet irises.

Abruptly, Rusko snaps the locket shut and whips around. His ears are held flat against his head, his eyes narrowed to further show his anger. Rusko growls, "I thought you were supposed to be asleep."

Ratchet's ears flatten back, and he snaps, "I was about to say the same thing about you." Ratchet breathes to help calm himself and his ears return to a neutral position. "Hey, calm down. I've never needed a lot of sleep. So... was that your family?"

Rusko sighs a deep, long sigh, and his shoulders slump as his body language shifts from angry back to depressed. A few seconds pass, and Rusko nods just barely enough for Ratchet to see the gesture. Rusko lifts the chain around his head and positions the locket back underneath his clothing.

One of the doors at the corners of the room slides open with a quiet hiss. The dark-furred lombax Kanna steps inside and walks over to Ratchet. "I see the two of you are awake. Let's get the others up and I'll bring you to the raid shack."

Rusko wakes Felix and Ratchet turns to the bunk above his to wake Angela. After getting Clank, the five follow Kanna through the underground base. While walking, Ratchet asks Rusko, "Why do you call it the 'raid shack'? Just out of curiosity."

"We keep our equipment there, and it's where we dump inventory we manage to lift from raids. That's why it ended up being called the 'raid shack'. We could call it 'Inventory', but for some reason we don't."

Clank notices that Kanna is staring at him out of the corner of her eyes, so he asks, "Excuse me, miss, but is there anything I can do to help you? You seem to be spending an inordinate amount of time looking at me."

Kanna sheepishly tries to shrug it off. "Sorry. I just always thought

you were a prop, I never thought you were a real robot.”

This draws curious stares from both Ratchet and Clank. Clank is the first one to respond. “I am not sure I understand.”

“Oh, you know the ‘Secret Agent Clank’ movies?” Now Angela adds to the stares sent at Kanna. “What? I’m an intelligence officer, it’s my business to know what’s going on in any galaxies the Ta’ree are active in. Not many of the people will know you, Clank, but just as a warning: most who do will think you’re a prop instead of a real . . . robot.”

Clank thinks for a moment as he walks. “I can accept that. It would not be as disturbing as walking into Nefarious’ base on Aquatos and discovering he was a top fan of the series.”

Ratchet chuckles at the memory of the large shelf set filled with ‘Secret Agent Clank’ holovids. How long had it been since Nefarious? It felt like mere days. Actually, it probably was.

“Here it is.” The group stops in front of a wide, rather tall set of double doors. As Kanna walks to the controls set onto the right door, she adds, “You’re in luck. Our Ta’ree smuggler has come with some new Stelcorp goods. He just recently came back from somehow slipping into the beta site.”

A rumble emanates from the doors as the heavy locks within rotate open. With a click, they snap into their open position and the doors slide outwards into the spacious hallway carved into the rock. After moving out a good five centimeters, the heavy metal then starts to slide to the side, stopping just enough to allow them through one at a time.

Inside are racks on racks of weapons, and many crates that Ratchet assumes hold even more weaponry. As he steps inside, he feels a familiar sensation, something reminiscent of somehow feeling a person staring at the back of your neck. “Hey, Clank. You gettin’ that eerie feeling...” Ratchet turns around and almost jumps in surprise. *I’d know those eyes anywhere.* “Slim? Slim Cognito?”

Staring back at him from the familiar slit is a pair of eyes, currently tightened indicating a smile. “If it isn’t my two best customers again. And to think, I had Solona as the last place I’d—” Slim’s eyes suddenly lock onto someone behind Ratchet. His expression instantly changes, if he were in the open he’d be backing up and have his hands in the air. “Why if it isn’t the lovely and talented miss Cross—”

“YOU!” Cross stomps next to Ratchet. “After all the time I spent

hunting you down to put you in prison—”

A hand grasps both her and Ratchet and draws them back a step while also turning them. “Whoa, wait a minute. You two know him?” The two lombaxes turn to Kanna.

Ratchet is the first to answer. “Well, yeah. He put the upgrades on my fighter and weapons. That Lock-On mod for my Heavy Lancer was really useful. I wonder why Megacorp didn’t have those as part of the upgrade package back then. Then when we were fighting Nefarious back in the Solona Galaxy, he got us some of our old weapons.” Ratchet looks at Angela. “What about you?”

“I work for Megacorp security now, remember? I spent the last four months tracking down and trying to arrest Cognito. We finally pinned him for selling an Ammo Capacitor on a Suck Canon to a 16-year-old.” She shoots a cold glare at Slim. “Of course, he made bail and ‘vanished’ to the Solona Galaxy a little under a month ago.”

Kanna shoots an impatient look at Slim through narrowed eyes. “We realize that Cognito had some... money-making ventures on the side. As long as he smuggles us Ta’ree equipment...”

The look well-faked reassurance returns to Slim’s eyes. “My dear Kanna, what kind of man do you take me for? Everyone’s gotta make a living. I assure you, I only charge for certain necessary services like shipping and handling.”

“Just show them the goods, Cognito.”

“Well, I don’t have much Megacorp or Gagetron merchandise here at the moment, though I think I can find you ammunition for the guns you’ve got. How about a napalm sprayer? Ratchet, you might find this a little reminiscent of your old Megacorp Lava Gun. Let’s see...” Slim’s eyes disappear for a moment as he digs around for his inventory list. “Here we are. Why don’t I just show you the list and you can pick.”

“Mini-Turrets? I didn’t expect to see these Megacorp weaps all the way out here, I thought they were a tightly protected weapon.”

Angela hefts a double-barreled Blaster. “Hey, Cognito. What’s this Blaster doing with two barrels?”

“Well, as you know, thanks to nanotechnology, these weapons all have many levels of upgrades. The blaster upgrades in stages every few levels, ‘growing’ a new barrel each stage. By four barrels, most people start callin’ it a Minigun. Ya ’know, like a gatling?”

Off a few meters away in the warehouse, Rusko holds up a Silksteel

suit. “Finally, it’s a mark two.” He tosses it over his shoulder, “Okay, guys, I’m done.”

The group takes their new weapons in hand and heads to the Banshee. As the doors start to close on the last one, Slim watches from behind his booth. *Didn’t I hear one of the guys say something about maintenance on that one? Something about ‘cuttlefish’... nah, must be my imagination.*

...

Moon Base, Moksha System. 12 December, 01:32 Standard Time

...

“I finished compiling the data from this week’s espionage efforts. I have a new ‘processing facility’ where they might have some data on your family, Rusko.” Kanna hands a thin data pad to Rusko. He skims the coordinates, then hands off the pad to Clank, who stores it in the mysterious compartment in his torso.

Felix bounds up the ramp and immediately turns and heads to his engines in the back. The others return to their spots on the bridge.

“Coordinates locked in. We’re going to be entering Ta’ree space, so be prepared for combat.” Angela and Ratchet give Rusko a confirming nod. “Engaging Graviton Warp Drive.”

17. Invisibility's Eye

Chapter 17: Invisibility's Eye

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Alfheim System. 12 December, 02:26 Standard Time

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The *Banshee* shudders under a direct hit from a railgun round of one of the orbital defenses. “Shields down to nineteen percent! Two more destroyers approaching, and a frigate is trying to lock on with its particle accelerator!”

Rusko jukes the *Banshee* up and pulls a hard right in beginning a ‘rocker’. By now, Ratchet is spraying pulse cannon fire. Three starfighters crumple and break apart under Ratchet’s relentless fire. Rusko abruptly breaks out of the rocker and thrusts the *Banshee* straight to starboard.

A series of massive blue beams pass through where the *Banshee* had been just a moment ago. Unfortunately, the Frigate was partly prepared. Most of the particle accelerator fire misses, but the gunner tracks the *Banshee* and the lombax vessel takes three solid hits. Warning alarms blare as the shields begin to fail.

Angela watches another three Ta’ree ships enter the edges of the tactical display, two of them big enough to be capital ships. “Rusko! Take us down into the atmosphere, maybe we can lose them in the clouds.”

A massive hit jars the *Banshee*, it would have knocked them from their chairs if they weren’t wearing restraint belts. Rusko jukes left and forces the *Banshee* into a tight corkscrew, tearing up away from the planet. He loops the *Banshee* around a destroyer, giving Ratchet an opening to unleash another volley of missiles to take it out before diving back down.

The *Banshee* nails the atmosphere at greater than the speed of sound, an orange glow quickly heating around the shields. Ta’ree fighters dive down and follow the *Banshee*, the heat of atmospheric entry making them look like flaming comets. The massive heat quickly eats away at the strength of the shields, and three of the already

damaged star-fighters burst into white-hot pieces. Even the *Banshee's* shields begin to flicker.

Still taking fire from the pursuing star-fighters, Rusko rotates the *Banshee* around, now putting the warship into a tail-first dive. He hits the thrusters and the super-heated aura fades. Unfortunately, the pursuing star-fighters are relentless in their attack, now unleashing every last torpedo and missile. The *Banshee's* last shields fail, shrinking back into the projectors.

Ratchet sprays pulse-cannon fire at the eight remaining star-fighters, finally eliminating all of them. With the exception of Clank, everyone on the bridge cheers. Then the *Banshee* jerks from a sudden hit, and several thrusters go out. The warship begins to drift, and before Rusko can whip the vessel around, another surface-to-air missile armed with a plasma warhead smashes into the *Banshee's* engines.

No! No! No! Rusko tries to force the control stick with a white-knuckled grip, but it refuses to respond. "I've lost engines!"

The green, hilly ground rushes up to meet them on the main view screen as the *Banshee* plummets down at a sharp angle. The others grasp the arms of the chairs and try to brace for impact as Rusko struggles with the controls. A couple thrusters blink back online and Rusko breathes a silent apology for not wanting Felix on board. Gripping the controls so hard he fears they'll snap, Rusko pulls with all his might to try to bring the ship out of its dive.

Clank looks up at the view screen to see the disturbingly close hills still racing up at them, and his head spins around in surprise. He straps himself in as the path begins to level out. Too little too late.

The *Banshee* crashes into the ground at almost a kilometer a second. Dirt explodes away from the ablative-armored, arrowhead-like ship as it smashes a huge gouge in the ground. The ground ahead of the *Banshee* is littered with trees and rocks, but the ship bats them aside like pebbles and toothpicks.

After plowing along for almost a full minute, the *Banshee* finally comes to a stop. Rusko unstraps himself from the chair and bangs his fists on the edge of the workstation in front of him in frustration. Ratchet turns around in his chair and notices that Angela isn't moving. "Angela?" He hastily removes his restraints, getting caught in one and falling flat on his face before stumbling out of the chair. "Angela, are you okay?"

Her hand raises up to cup the side of her head and she moans. "Oh,

man, that's going to be a nasty bruise tomorrow." She slowly turns to Ratchet. "I'll be fine, I've just got a few bumps." Ratchet breathes a sigh of relief.

Rusko trudges towards the exit door at the rear, heading for the cargo access. "I'm gonna get my gear and do some recon."

Ratchet, while stepping sideways out of the way, retorts, "What about the ship? Aren't you going to lend a hand to try to speed up repairs?"

Rusko half-turns his torso to Ratchet. "Ratchet, I'm a Shadow Commando. I fly and I fight, but I don't know the difference between a wrench and a... that metal thingie." He turns back around and walks through the doorway. Before continuing, he adds over his shoulder, "Since I'm the only one with a Cuttlefish Cloaking Device, I'm the only one who can safely go out, anyway." He taps a button at the side and the door slides shut behind him.

After getting the enhanced weaponry he picked up on the moon base, Rusko lets his suit's systems initialize and run through a few diagnostics. He activates the Cuttlefish Cloak and vanishes with a *shhnnllllk*. A diagram with a few lines of red blinks onto the HUD, but then disappears.

...

Mos Llenar in the Alfheim System. 12 December, 03:54 Standard Time

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A guard walks along the high outer wall of the processing compound. Stepping into Rusko's cross-hairs, the Falnarian commando can even make out his rank and unit number through the sniper scope he is sweeping across the facility.

He puts away his sniper rifle and gets up from his prone position. He advances quickly and silently over the lightly forested hills, keeping to the shadows. Though dawn may still be several hours away, two nearly full moons shine brightly and light up the landscape very clearly. A few meters away lies a large, poorly camouflaged utility entrance for service vehicles. The entering vehicle he was waiting for rumbles towards the gate, which slides open with a noisy metal rattling. Rusko hops onto the back and grabs on before its rear wheels pass onto the pressure sensor just inside the entrance.

The automated vehicle continues into the wide, paved court to the garages. After a few meters, he is sure he has passed the pressure

sensors and he hops off the truck. His cloaking device appears on the HUD, then vanishes. Rusko dismisses it as a display error.

He walks farther forward, reaching to his waist for his keycard hacker. The cloaking device appears on the HUD again, this time a red circuitry failure line shows before it clears. *Stupid suit, the diagnostic software must be malfunctioning.* He takes a few paces towards the door to the offices when the cloaking device again appears in the corner of his HUD. Unfortunately, this time it is accompanied by a *ssshhnnlllllk*.

“Oh, crud.”

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Sandy87: It's wonderful to get a longer review, just remember to review! I'm happy that I have another fan of the present tense, I always liked how it forced me to make everything immediate, it forces me to focus on the now, including the events leading right into and out of the present. I also like the approval of the nod to Russian history, I just re-read a book that mentioned the Stalin Purges and the network of gulags; I'm a bit of a historical/cultural anthropology hobbyist.

If anyone's interested, the sound effect for the cloaking device I always imagine just like the Stealth Tank's cloak from "Command & Conquer: Tiberian Dawn" (aka C&C Classic, or C&C 1). I extracted the sound file from my game, if anyone wants to hear the .wav. Too bad I can't just post it here, that sound effect rocks.

18. Killing Machine

Chapter 18: Killing Machine

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Mos Llenar in the Alfheim System. 12 December, 04:17 Standard Time

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Angela steps back into the bridge to use the sensors to sweep the area again as Ratchet and a very angry Felix try to fix the *Banshee*. Since Angela's expertise was in biology rather than mechanics, there is little help she can provide. Even Clank is making himself useful. As she sits down, she sighs at the feeling of uselessness. The ship picks up Rusko at the Ta'ree processing compound nearby.

Surrounded by a swarm of Ta'ree.

With his cloaking device deactivated.

She stands up so quickly she bangs her knees on the forward edge of the workstation. "Ratchet! Get your weapons, Rusko's in trouble!"

...

Prison on Mos Llenar. 12 December, 04:20 Standard Time

...

The Ta'ree warden steps out of the office door Rusko was just about to sneak in through. Completely filling the courtyard are the Megacorp-built red and white robots with their eerie yellow eyes and two pulse guns.

The warden chuckles. "Normally, I have to wait for the police to bring in lombaxes. I never thought that one would deliver himself. And was that a cloaking device? I do believe that I may find myself a medal for stopping a Shadowkhan."

The Ta'ree chuckles again, the deep throaty sound piercing straight through Rusko's metaphorical thick skin and making the lombax bear his teeth menacingly, only provoking the warden to laugh outright. Rusko's ears fold angrily back against his head so hard the warden

thinks they're about to meld into the lombax's skull. Rusko holds back the desire to ring the Ta'ree's neck with great difficulty.

"Did you notice the ship we shot down?" He chuckles again and Rusko flexes his fists as the warden continues. 'Your extraction is gone.' The warden stops and the smile wipes from his face. *However, I know how dangerous a Shadow Commando can be, and the price of not properly dealing with one.* He turns to the dozens of Megacorp machines pointing weapons at Rusko. "Kill him."

With a mechanical predictability, the red and white security droids all turn their heads to Rusko. Without wasting a moment, they begin unleashing energy fire into him. Rusko can't dodge the first volley and takes a direct hit from at least eight droids.

His HUD begins going wild, blaring warnings. Rusko extends his claws and curses, knowing that he's a dead man either way. However, a new object appears on Rusko's HUD: his nanogland. Next to it, a list starts to appear.

Activating adrenaline glands.
Releasing norepinephrine.
Inhibiting prostaglandin.
Suppressing neospinothalamic neurons.
Suppressing periaqueductal gray center.

A long list scrolls by, but by the time he finished reading 'norepinephrine', his vision is going red and he is rapidly losing lucidity. Another blow strikes him and he unleashes a bestial roar. With his right hand glinting from sharp claws, the other hand snaps open and glistens. Snarling and practically frothing, Rusko begins wildly swinging at everything around him.

Rusko smashes through the waves of Ta'ree defenses, the molecule-thick claw edges slashing through the robots like a hot knife through butter. He sprints around the courtyard after his prey so quickly that he nearly appears to blur, cutting the robotic troopers into shrapnel with a hyper-frenzy.

Rusko 'awakens', standing in the middle of the courtyard surrounded by debris. The walls are scored with strikes from stray lasers and blood splatters various spots on his armor, only some of it his own. Looking around, he can't spot any sign of the warden. A 'tink' of a hypershot grapple contacting a gripable metal surface seizes his attention, and he whips around to see Ratchet and Angela scaling the compound wall.

Ratchet and Angela both pause to stare in amazement at the

carnage surrounding Rusko. The lombax commando retracts away his weapons and glances around once more, refusing to believe that he could have possibly have done so much damage. “Well, let’s get going.” *Might as well not leave this operation a complete waste.*

Ratchet hops off the ledge and glides down with the help of Clank, strapped to his back. Angela has to take a little longer, but she manages to clamber down to the courtyard with a suitable degree of grace.

Rusko returns to the door he was about to sneak through. As he expected, the door is locked. Rusko smirks and takes out his keycard hacker, fumbling a moment with the ribbon cable connecting the reader card with the hack computer. He inserts the card and simply waits, holding the tiny hacking computer in his hand as it cracks the Ta’ree security. The lock clicks green and the door slides open.

Rusko replaces his keycard and draws a triple-barreled Blaster. Cautiously, ears flicking attentively this way and that, he steps lightly inside. Ratchet and Angela follow him. They carefully make their way down a hallway and Rusko stops at the intersection, pressing himself against the wall at the corner. His eyes close as he tries to remember which way to the control center, all Ta’ree processing compounds are built the same, and Rusko has infiltrated many.

He seems to remember which way to go, because he dashes off down one turn, keeping low and his gun ready. Apparently, Rusko must have destroyed the building guard, because the group meets no resistance on their way to the computer center.

“Here it is, the mainframe should be just beyond these doors.” Rusko pulls out his keycard hacker and inserts the card into the reader beside the door. The screen flashes red with a few jagged yellow patterns, then ejects the card reader. Rusko mutters curses in a foreign tongue under his breath.

Ratchet steps up. “I’ll get it.” He raises his Omniwrench and strikes the control panel with exact precision, knocking it off and exposing the wires and fiber optic cabling underneath. *Damn, if only this thing could have just had a hacker terminal, I’d have broken through. I have no idea how to pick a lock.*

Fortunately, Rusko is well trained in re-wiring Ta’ree locks. He nudges Ratchet aside and makes short work of the security measure, showing the latter his procedure. The door slides open and he stands up with a smirk. The three (four, including Clank on Ratchet’s back) walk into the room. A couple of computer terminals are set into the

same wall as the door, but otherwise the room is filled with open computer circuits and servers.

Clank hops down and walks next to one of the terminals. “They have a universal serial bus port, I should be able to hack into the cyber-network.” Rusko nods and Ratchet steps to the side to allow Clank access. The little robot plugs in and the screen of the terminal flickers from a dead black to a soft gray. “Hmmm, that’s strange.”

Ratchet looks at the blank screen, one eyebrow raised. “What? I’m not seeing anything.”

“The files have all been deleted. The computer record shows that all data pertinent to prisoners was deleted today, at 02:30.” Clank opens his mouth to say something else, but freezes in position, his mouth open and his hand raised, one finger extended in a gesture that might indicate he found something.

“Clank? Clank, what is it?” Ratchet is about to kneel down to look at his robotic companion when suddenly images begin flashing by on the screen. The inside of a Blargian robot factory. Ratchet, when Clank first met him on Veldin. An angry Ratchet when the lombax realized Drek was going to destroy Veldin. The Thugs-4-Less flying prison, Ratchet in his Electrosteel Armor, his hands raised as he demanded they rescue Angela. Ratchet with fists clenched as he promises Qwark the beating of his life on Florana.

Angela realizes what is happening: the computer is downloading Clank’s mind and is about to delete the robot’s. She whips out her sword and severs the cable the instant between the computer completing downloading Clank’s memories and sending the deletion signal to wipe the little robot’s brain.

In all of the chaos between Clank and the computer, nobody noticed several Ta’ree guards slip into the room. A sharp blow to the back of the head sends Ratchet crashing against the computer terminal, out cold. Rusko hears the footsteps behind them, but before he can turn, a solid blunt blow to the base of his skull sends him sprawling onto the ground, dazed and almost unconscious.

Angela somehow senses the Ta’ree and ducks, the butt of the rifle brushing harmlessly against her ear rather than smashing into the back of her head. She clicks her sword on, activating the aura of plasma around the carbonox blade. She whips around and swings, catching the guard and cutting a long, upward diagonal slash through his chest plate.

The guard drops his rifle and clutches at his chest, hissing in pain.

Unfortunately, there are two other Ta'ree. Before Angela can try to fend off these two, the one to her right whips out what looks like a simple black rod. At the tip sit two metallic prongs. He touches it to Angela's shoulder and squeezes the handgrip.

The zap prod sends a stream of pure pain through Angela's body. She convulses and drops to the ground, screaming. The last thing she feels is the butt of a rifle contacting the right side of her head.

19. A Marked Man

Chapter 19: A Marked Man

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Prison on Mos Llenar. 12 December, 06:32 Standard Time

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“Terrorist cells most often operate in groups of three, so I believe we have the entire strike squad. They had quite an arsenal of weaponry, particularly the short male. Only the taller male had Silksteel armor, but insurgents often have unequal equipment distribution in the Kel’no’reem.” The warden scrolls down through the report in front of him as the proconsul on the other side of the screen folds his hands.

The proconsul glances at something off-screen, then replies, “Excellent. A ship should be coming in on the twenty-fifth. Add these insurgents to the outgoing. That means you have twelve days to extract their mission and any other information.”

“But sir, it could take more than five days just to break their will to resist questioning, and to start getting into any pertinent information will take at least ten. I need more time—”

The proconsul cuts him off with one swish of the hand. “I’m not interested in hearing excuses. You’re in enough trouble with the district council for not stopping that last breakout.” The proconsul leans back and adds in a subdued, menacing tone. “If someone were to become suspicious that you were... intentionally doing less than your utmost, there might be an investigation.”

The warden could hardly believe his ears. “Proconsul! You know that I’m a loyal citizen of Tak’sen! I—”

“Then give me results, not excuses.” The channel clicks off, the image of the proconsul replaced by the crest of Tak’sen: a triangle with an inverted dark triangle inscribed inside.

The warden stares aghast at the screen. *I can’t believe this. I can’t afford... another investigation would...*

The door slides open, interrupting the warden's line of thought. He breathes a sigh of relief at that, and stands up to greet the entering Ta'ree, a major who had recently transferred from another facility. "Major, do you have the scans on the three new insurgents?"

The major nods and hands the data pad to the warden, who eagerly begins reading. As he starts, the major hesitantly asks, "Sir, excuse me if I am out of line, because you are the sector expert in lombax interrogation, but what about the prisoners captured from—"

"They will have to wait. These three have tried to strike Tak'sen itself, and that cannot be allowed to escape unpunished. We have several high-payoff targets imprisoned here, and the district inspector general just fled this morning. We need to know if this was a specific extraction or if their mission was different." The warden stands and the major follows him out the office door as he heads to the prisoners to begin interrogation. "One last thing, major. You are the most highly trained *entar* at the facility. Are you sure that all three insurgents are *entars*?"

"Yes sir. Especially the female. I scanned all of them, and her readings were off the chart." *Of course, this prison is poorly equipped to deal with entars. She would be the third one I've heard of with a reading beyond our instrument limits.* "Fortunately, once they were separated, I believe that only the tall male is trained. Of course, I can't be certain about the female. Trying to sense... anything around her is like trying to swim in a flood. It's really aggravating."

The warden nods to the major and turns back to the door, report still in hand. The door to the interrogation room is directly in front of them. Inside are the three recently captured lombaxes. Their armor and weapons removed, now they wear the loose, annoyingly bright orange prisoner uniforms. Their hands and ankles are each clasped together, and they are kneeling, knee to toe flat on the floor. The major walks elsewhere and the warden enters.

The warden clasps his hands behind his back and slowly paces in front of the three. "I see we have another batch of terrorists—" Rusko growls, "—here today. What was your mission?"

Rusko stares forward, his eyes fixed on a nondescript part of the floor ahead of him. Ratchet, on the end, briefly glances to his right at Angela and Rusko, then drops his gaze down. Nobody answers or speaks.

The warden rolls his eyes. "Very well." He snaps his fingers. Three guards, one each, steps up behind the lombaxes. The guards hold zap

prods, what appears to be little more than thin, eight inch long cylinders with black plastic coating. At one end is a handgrip with a triggering mechanism, at the opposite protrude two metal contact prongs. The guards touch the prods to the base of the lombaxes' necks and squeeze the 'on' button.

Waves of blinding pain surge into the prisoners. Their muscles spasm involuntarily and all three scream. The warden snaps his fingers again and the guards draw back the prods. Ratchet, Angela, and Rusko all sit back up and breathe heavily.

"Which prisoner were you sent to extract? Or was this a general processing center break-out?"

Rusko ignores the warden, again staring back at that nondescript point on the floor. Ratchet and Angela try to follow along, but the warden notices the slightest of hesitation from them. He takes a step towards Angela. "What was your mission?"

Angela forces her eyes to remain staring blankly down. The warden holds in a huff of indignation, instead he snaps his fingers. The guard behind Angela stabs the 'pain staff' into her back. She screams and Ratchet's head whips around. "Angela!"

The warden snaps his fingers. The guard behind Angela withdraws his staff, and the one behind Ratchet pokes it forward, giving a momentary shock to Ratchet.

"Who was your target?"

Rusko is tempted to mutter saying that killing the warden was their goal, but he bites his tongue and forces himself to remain silent. Unfortunately for him, the warden notices Rusko tense.

"Have something to say? Monkey." A few muscles in Rusko's neck twitch. The warden thinks a short moment. "Terrorist."

"Ren'ta'heel!"

The guard behind Rusko jams the staff into the base of Rusko's neck. Rusko grits his teeth, but can't overcome the massive agony. His muscles spasm and he roars as waves of pure pain flood through him.

The warden steps back and smirks to himself. *The two others didn't know what he meant when he called me 'mud fish'.* The smirk vanishes as his mind re-centers on Rusko. *Unfortunately, he also looks too well trained, I can't have his resistance encourage the others.* "Take him to cell Charlie-three-two."

The guard applying the staff to Rusko backs up and puts the device

on his belt. One of the guards standing at the door walks forward and reaches down to help the other to pick up Rusko by the arms and drag him out of the room towards the individual holding cells.

The warden watches them drag Rusko out, and the moment the door slides shut he spins around and refocuses his attention on Ratchet and Angela. "If you are waiting for your extraction, don't bother. We destroyed your ship, and the eighth cruiser battalion is holding security. Now, there are some questions I want answered. I suggest you start volunteering information."

...

Crash Site on Mos Llenar. 22 December, 20:14 Standard Time

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Felix finishes wielding the impulse-thruster focal coil back into place. After having spent more than an hour cleaning this segment of the thruster engines, repairs are moving slowly. Felix holds out the fusion spanner for a moment before remembering that Angela, Ratchet, and even Clank left to go check on Rusko. *Stupid brutes, I can't believe what they did to my ship.*

Felix continues to mutter to himself as he clambers down the folding stepladder to set his tool in its place in the toolbox. He searches through it for a phase bore, but doesn't see the laser-drill-like device in the main toolbox. "Must be in my bag in engineering," Felix grumbles.

The engineer jogs around the toolbox and around the starboard side of the *Banshee* until he reaches the open hatch. He walks up the extended ramp and through the compact airlock just beyond it. After the airlock, a narrow hallway stretches out to the left, the door to the bridge to his right. The bridge door slides open automatically as Felix walks in front of it. He is about to turn left to the engine room where he left his tool bag, when a blinking glow at communications draws his eye.

Felix steps cautiously in the bridge. Though he may have practically put the ship together from its first parts, and he was trained to operate it, he feels out of place here. The glow that drew his attention is one of the smaller screens at communications, flashing blue to indicate an incoming channel. Felix slowly sits down in the leather chair, then hits a keystroke to open the channel.

The screen flickers for a moment before the visual feed from a surveillance camera inside the prison appears. Ratchet and Angela are

kneeling in a room, their hands and feet bound, with three humanoid guards and an interrogator pacing before them. The two lombaxes look like they've been beaten for ten days straight, Angela looks like she's about to collapse and can hardly breathe.

Felix hears the voice of Ratchet's robot friend over the speakers, "This is Clank, are you there Felix?"

"This does not have to be so difficult. Simply answer the question: Who did you come here to extract?"

Angela looks wearily up at the interrogator. "We told you... we didn't come to spring anybody from prison."

The interrogator turns around, his hands calmly clasped behind the small of his back.

"Yeah, Fe..." The technician realizes that he isn't sending, so he taps a button to activate the transmitter. "Felix here. Where are you, Clank?"

The guard behind Angela steps forward and pokes an eight-inch black rod into Angela's back. It looks like lightning erupts from the device, surging through Angela. She screams and spasms.

Felix nearly jumps up from the chair. Clank's voice comes over the main speakers, "That is actually rather complicated. We managed to infiltrate the facility, but it was a trap."

The guard draws the rod back and Angela wavers, slowly pulling herself back into the sitting / kneeling position.

The interrogator turns back to the two lombaxes. "Since you two seem so determined not to tell me what your mission was, I will propose this question again: which of you would prefer to feel the empathy?"

Clank continues as if he didn't see what was on the camera, "I have managed to remain hidden, but as you can see, the others have been captured. Rusko was placed into a holding cell barely large enough for him to stand in, the Ta'ree seem to be attempting to use sleep deprivation and environmental discomfort to try to extract information out of him. They are using what the guards call 'pain staffs' or 'zap prods' on Ratchet and Angela."

Felix's breathing starts becoming rapid and his tone rises as a helpless panic begins to grip him, "But I'm not a combat soldier! The Banshee is no-where near repaired, what am I—?"

"Please calm, Felix. I know that things look bad, but work as quickly as you safely can. I am analyzing the compound for points

vulnerable to sabotage, but there are numerous circuits that I must manually override and my robot self can not reach them yet. Wait, my memories are being accessed—”

...

Prison on Mos Llenar. 23 December, 18:37 Standard Time

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Inside the white-washed, brightly lit computer center are several simple work stations. Three of them are occupied by Ta’ree, one of them by the warden. He gazes at all six of the monitors at his station, displaying information downloaded from the insurgents’ hack device, apparently named ‘Clank’. Each of the monitors displays a different segment of memory. One a harrowing escape from a factory. Another fighting against ‘Blargian’ forces logging a forest planet. Sneaking through the vents of a prison ship.

“Warden!”

The Ta’ree clicks the pause button and turns around in his tall, armless chair. “What is it, major?”

The major jogs from a door at the side of the room. *I wouldn’t be doing this if we weren’t so short on personnel. Since that Shadow Commando went on a rampage in the west courtyard, we’ve only got a dozen Ta’ree and a handful of robots.* “Things with the three prisoners is not going well, they’re much more resistant than most lombaxes. We’ve learned their names, the tall male being ‘Rusko’, the short one ‘Ratchet’—”

“What, like the tool?” The warden snickers.

The major frowns, but stays in line. “And the female is ‘Cross Angela’. We haven’t gotten anything extremely solid and confirmable yet, but we believe Cross may be from the Bogon Galaxy, she knows too much about a company called ‘Megacorp’ for a Falnarian. Unless she is an extremely well trained counter-intelligence unit. Ratchet is from a new galaxy called ‘Solona’, I couldn’t find any information on it.”

“I’ve never heard of it, though it could just be an attempt to try to confuse us.” The major looks down at the warden, as if waiting for the administrator to elaborate. “Never mind. No breakthroughs or slips about their mission?”

The major shakes his head. “I’m sorry, sir. They’re sticking with the story that they just came for information. That does seem to be the

truth, the presence of the general and those captains shipped here from the Degoba system must have just been coincidence.”

“Here, hand me the report.” The major hands the pad to the warden, who sets it down on the desk without looking at it. His eyes return to the six screens, each frozen midway through one of Clank’s memories.

The major begins walking away, and suddenly the warden has an idea. “Major, hold on a moment.” He turns around to face the major. “You haven’t been having much success extracting information from Cross and Ratchet, despite interrogating them together?”

The major shakes his head. “It’s slow, sir. They’re not exactly giving textbook reactions, and we have no idea what mechanical failure caused both... interrogation chambers to fail.”

The warden runs his hand through his short, unruly hair. “I think we’ve been taking the wrong route, I should have seen it when information started coming up when we questioned them together. Clear one of the solitary holding cells. Put both of them in. And leave the microphone on.”

...

Prison on Mos Llenar. 25 December, 14:21 Standard Time

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Two guards walk steadily through the hallways to a specified solitary cell. The burly leading guard drags Angela with his left hand. He pauses and de-activates the force-field, then throws her in. Angela crumples like a sack of potatoes. The other guard walks up, dragging Ratchet. “Stand up.”

Angela stirs, but doesn’t rise. The first guard reaches to his belt and draws a zap prod. Angela groans, but slowly pushes herself up before he can use it, the task made enormously more difficult due to the wrist cuffs and the presence of the guards warning her not to rotate her arms over her head to get them in front where they can do some good.

Before Angela can stand fully, the second guard tosses Ratchet in. He crashes against her, and the moment his tail is beyond the doorway, the first guard re-activates the force-field and both walk away.

The cell is about as tall as a broom closet, and even more compact. Less than a half meter by a half meter, it would be just barely big

enough for a human to stand. Lombaxes are smaller, and there would be room for one to curl up on the floor if there was only one. Unfortunately, there are two in very close proximity.

The two awkwardly bump into each other a few times, but the force-field burns when he tries to turn around and he settles on staring at the wall. There isn't even enough space for them to slip their wrists over their heads, a fact which both of them curse in the uncomfortable, close space.

Ratchet leans against the cold, damp wall and mutters something unrepeatable in mixed company at the water dripping from the ceiling, and the shallow pooling at his feet, wondering why the cell has a water leak. "I'm sorry about this mess, Angela, I should've been watching our backs—"

"Knock it off, Ratchet. I'm the Megacorp security chief, I should have been paying attention." Angela leans against the far wall and gingerly prods at her right ear, noticing a swelling at the base from where the rifle butt struck her.

Unable to get comfortable in the cold, cramped, wet space, Ratchet decides to try to converse to keep his mind occupied. "I've wondered, how exactly did you get into security?"

"Well, you know the Protopet project?"

"Uh-huh."

"Megacorp had been getting several contracts for the Ta'ree by the point, and they were starting to shift the budget for manufacturing. The Protopet project was the last make-or-break effort of the genetics division. As you can guess, even when the protopets were rendered harmless by my helixomorph, everybody remembered them as destructive beasts that bred like a plague. Nobody wanted them, so the project failed. Genetics was practically shut down.

"Fortunately, Security Chairman Dorn was impressed by how well I was able to work against Megacorp when I did my 'mysterious thief' act, so he thought it'd be safer to have me working *for* security than against it. That's how I got promoted to security." She looks at him, trying to ignore the dull throbbing in her right ear where the rifle butt hit it the day before. "What about you? What did you do since the Protopet incident?"

Ratchet opens his mouth, but before he can answer, suddenly the power goes out. The lights instantly extinguish, the force-field drops, and a low hum rolls through as equipment shuts down. Ratchet

springs out of the cell door, tripping, with his arms still behind him, and the cuffs still on his wrists and ankles. He growls and rotates his arms over his head, then pushes himself up. Angela follows him out, falling straight on him and knocking both to the ground. The two awkwardly get back up with the cuffs still on their arms and legs. Once upright, she drops down to try to pick the cuffs off her feet.

A hum rumbles through the ceiling, and then the lights flicker back on. The force-fields re-activate, and a rising whirl stretches through the walls as equipment re-starts. A slightly feminine voice clicks on over the speakers in the distance, "Power failure in capacitor coil number six. Technician, please report to central distribution node two and replace the coil."

Ratchet looks down at Angela, still trying to open the cuffs. "Any luck?"

Angela stands and scowls. "No, I can't get the damned things off. Any idea where some equipment is?"

Ratchet looks around. The two lombaxes are standing in the middle of a ninety-degree bend in the hall. The off-white walls seem to make the sparsely lit corridor look even more dreary. Ratchet looks at the many holding cells, noting that the inhabitants appear to be exclusively lombaxes. Depressingly, only four other lombaxes escaped from their cells, and all of them are busy checking over each others' cuffs. Ratchet hops over to the nearest occupied cell, cursing his ankle-cuffs. With a punch of the button, the prisoner's force-field flickers off. "Mind giving us a hand?"

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Prison on Mos Llenar. 25 December, 16:42 Standard Time

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Distance to target: 1,200 meters.

Felix moves his thumbs to press two buttons at the sides of the control sticks, near the top. Armored flaps open on the top and bottom of both wings and four missiles flit out towards the advanced guard tower on the western perimeter of the prison. The missiles contact and detonate, blasting open the titanium-reinforced concrete.

He re-adjusts his grip and squeezes his index fingers on the primary trigger. The pulse-guns erupt in fire, spraying blue-tinged-purple fire at the structure as it rotates a few turrets at the *Banshee*. Before they have a chance to fire, the raking energy fire from the *Banshee* cracks apart the tower and it starts to lean, groaning as it tears at supports

before toppling over.

Felix strafes the *Banshee* left and right to avoid the anti-air missiles that rush at him. Fortunately, the weaponry is designed and placed for attacking at a long range, rather than dealing with a pocket warship hovering a few meters above the ground. Felix sprays fire at the turrets, quickly taking them out as they spin frantically, trying to get a target lock. The walls of the prison loom ahead of him, tall and rectangular, with basic guard towers at each corner.

The guard towers turn some basic pulse guns at the *Banshee*, but the Megacorp ship's self-regenerative shields easily take the pinprick blows. The computer slowly locks onto each of the four towers, then Felix presses his thumbs against the side buttons to send another missile at each tower. All of them explode, and Felix moves in to see red emergency lights rotating in the courtyard below. Before setting the *Banshee* down, Felix does a flyby around the facility to check and make sure the facility is essentially defenseless and ready for him to land. After destroying a small power generator, what he assumes to be a backup structure, he turns back to the courtyard.

Doors slide open, and from within the compound, the engineer can see gunfire flashes. A couple of lombaxes hop out, cuffs around their wrists and hands. The flash of a shotgun flickers from the doorway, downing one and injuring another of the orange-clad prisoners. The Ta'ree guard steps out into the courtyard, then whips around. More lombaxes are streaming out, most making plenty of room between one particular lombax and the Shock Rifle-armed Ta'ree.

The guard pumps the weapon and aims at the lombax without cuffs, running at him like a lion after the prey. The guard shoots, but one of the brave lombaxes to the side jumps and knocks the weapon off target. The shot strikes the wall, only a few pellets striking lombax prisoners.

Another lombax with long stripes leaps, clamping down on the Ta'ree's kneck like a lion a gazelle. The guard gurgles and goes down. Hesitantly, Felix lands the *Banshee*. The orange-clad prisoners give him plenty of room, afraid of backwash from the thrusters, but they stare in curiosity and quickly approach after the ship touches down.

Felix grabs his Heavy Lancer and opens the hatch. None of the lombaxes greet him, so he asks, "Does anybody know where Chief Cross or Ratchet is? Or someone named Rusko?"

"Here." A weak voice answers from the far side of the courtyard, at a door almost hidden in the inner compound. Felix jogs to the voice's

source to find Rusko, limping and barely on his feet besides, Ratchet's arm around his shoulder to keep the shorter lombax from collapsing. Behind him is another lombax in a rather primitive-looking brown tunic, supporting Angela.

"Chief Cross!" Felix slings his Lancer behind his back and runs forward, taking a haggard and barely conscious Angela from the pale-furred lombax in the brown tunic. Angela almost collapses during the transition, and it feels more like he is entirely carrying her than just helping her walk, but he leads her and Rusko back to the *Banshee*.

...

Prison on Mos Llenar. 25 December, 16:59 Standard Time

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The warden, hidden on the roof of the western compound building by the main courtyard, watches the insurgents below escape. *Damned, this is almost the entire prison population. The proconsul will have my head on a silver platter for this.* He watches four lombaxes, three once his prisoners and the fourth wearing Megacorp body armor.

The warden glares, anger and hatred rising like bile. *Him, that 'Felix', this mess was all started by him!* The warden watches his target walk into the *Banshee* as he continues to think to himself, *Run, you lomban scum. I swear, if it's the last thing I do, I'll kill you.*

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"When you are done with this session, clear one of the solitary holding cells. Put both of them in. And leave a microphone on."

In "The Gulag Archipelago", Aleksander Solzenitzen mentions that the secret police would use methods like sleep/water/food deprivation, and many prisoners would frequently be confined into areas that were too small for them. His specific example included holding rooms in stone facilities, the room was small enough that the prisoner had to stand, but was often too short to fully stand.

In cells holding large numbers of prisoners, "stool pigeons" would often be sent in to listen to other prisoners, and encourage them to confess to crimes they didn't commit, or to trick them into implicating other people in false crimes.

20. Epiphany

Chapter 20: Epiphany

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Prison on Mos Llenar. 15 December, 16:58 Standard Time

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Felix and Rusko help Ratchet and Angela to the only seats in the ship, in the bridge. After dropping Ratchet into the chair, despite how tired and badly injured he appears, he turns right around and limps out of the bridge towards the airlock. Felix, unable to run ahead of him in the cramped space, grabs his arm to stop the Falnarian. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I need — I mean *we* need to get our equipment back. We can’t leave it in the hands of the Ta’ree.” Rusko weakly pulls himself away from Felix’s grasp and heads back towards the compound. Felix sighs and looks up at the cloudy, rumbling sky, but he knows Rusko is right.

Rusko heads out, then glances up at the roof of the compound building. *Strange, I thought I saw something up there.* The exhaustion weighs his eyelids, trying to draw them closed. Rusko shakes his head and moves unsteadily forward.

The two walk to confiscation storage room two. The door slides open, and Clank’s voice comes over the speakers, “Do not worry about the security systems, I have control.”

Rusko walks into the storage room, still trying to hide his limp. Felix follows him in and they search through the neatly organized shelves. Fortunately, the room was virtually empty before Ratchet and the others were captured, so their equipment is easy to find. Rusko reaches his Silksteel suit, but Felix notices that instead of immediately donning the armor, he continues ruffling through items.

After another few shelves, a haggard, dirty, and tired Falnarian lombax finds what he truly came to the storage to recover: a small, dull silvery locket. Rusko clasps the locket in one hand before he collapses of exhaustion.

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The *Banshee* exits warp in a bright twisting of light. With Rusko and the others asleep, Felix had to rely on the navigational computer to help get him back to the rebel system. After bringing the *Banshee* to a full stop just inside the system's oort cloud, he removes his seat restraints and sits in the pilot's seat thinking about how he got himself into this mess. "Well, Felix. You wanted to make a difference."

"Are you speaking to yourself?"

Felix turns around in the pilot's chair to look at Clank, who just spoke to him. The little robot is diligently working at the sensors workstation. Felix answers, "Just thinking to myself." He turns a little more to face Ratchet, waking up at tactical. "You want to take over?"

Ratchet begins to yawn, but quickly stifles it. He nods wordlessly and waits for Felix to unbuckle his straps and walk to the back of the bridge before getting out of his own seat and proceeding to the pilot's chair. He raises the shields as a precautionary measure and then takes the *Banshee* into the field, to the moon of the third planet. Throughout the entire long trip, Felix sits silently at the back of the bridge, thinking about the transmissions the computer Clank sent him on Mos Llenar.

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Moksha System. 16 December, 14:36 Standard Time

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Ratchet and the others sit around the long, rectangular table in the briefing room. Kanna sits at the head of the table, at least a dozen data pads scattered in front of her. Ratchet and the others are all clustered on the opposite end. Dominating one wall is a large screen, displaying an image of the prison compound on Mos Llenar, a snapshot taken by Felix as he flew the *Banshee* past on an attack run. Kanna sets down the pad she was reading, then picks up a new one.

Ratchet, having sat and impatiently cooperated during the debriefing, now asks, "Uh, listen, Kanna, it's not that I don't understand the importance of going over our prison break-out, but after four times, can we just get these new coordinates for Rusko and go?"

Kanna, already having gone back to her reports and almost forgotten that the others are there, distractedly answers, "Yeah, uh-

huh.” She continues reading without looking up. “This break-out was great, we got back six captain agents and the Ta’ree are scrambling.”

Rusko rolls his eyes and stands up. While Kanna continues to pour through intelligence reports, Ratchet and the others slip out and head to the raid shack. After waiting for the large doors to open up enough for them to enter, just like last time, they step into the slightly insufficiently lit underground warehouse.

Rusko, having been a regular at such warehouses, wanders off. Ratchet, Clank, and Felix slowly proceed towards Cognito. Angela browses through the weapons in the same direction. Ratchet jogs up to Slim’s booth, greeted by the familiar eyes. “Hey, Slim. What’s up?”

“Well, well, if it isn’t my favorite customers again. I just came in with a huge load of new Stelcorp equipment I think you will be very interested in.” An inventory pad slides out of another slot in Slim’s booth. ‘By the way, I’ve got a special new toy for you.’ Something that looks like a metal egg slides out of the weapon slot, rocking momentarily before it comes to balance on a weighted end. “It’s called a ‘Hadar’, they should remind you of Synthenoids back from Bogon.”

Ratchet picks up the container. “Oh, yes. I loved those things. I remember wishing I could just go back and get a couple of those when I was trying to use those annoying ‘Agents of Doom’ in Solona.”

Before Ratchet and Slim can continue their banter, or Slim can address the instinctive glare Angela shot at him, Rusko steps into view between tall shelves of equipment holding a silksteel armor suit. Since he’s at least ten meters away, he shouts over the distance, “Hey, Cognito. Is there anything wrong with this one?”

“Nah. The one you picked up was in for maintenance, that Teslatanium’s new.”

“Finally!” Rusko’s frown shallows a little, almost as if he is considering smiling, but instead he steps out of view to the side.

Angela, now the one with the inventory list, lets her arm fall. “Cognito, I’ve got a question I need to ask. You’re a Ta’ree, I can sense it, but you’re helping lombaxes. Why?”

Slim’s eyes narrow and he quickly shifts from a light and positive demeanor to cold. “In case you don’t know, *miss Cross*,” Slim spits out her name snidely, “Lombaxes created the Ta’ree. We were no more than lab rats to Lomban. The Ta’ree have never forgotten that, and most of them are terrified of the possibility that they may become your lab rats again. That’s why they set out to break lombaxes’

collective will, it's the only defense they can think of. So *I* decided to do what I thought was right. Sure, I like money more than is good for me, but I've suffered for lombaxes, *you've* seen the burns to prove it."

Angela's eyes drop down in guilt. "I'm sorry. It's just... sometimes this seems too big to be real. Sometimes I feel like I've been dropped in the middle of a crazy video game."

Now Felix steps forward. "I know what that's like, Chief Cross. I'm kind of ashamed to admit this, but the first reason I didn't want you to take the *Banshee* was because I was concerned I might lose my chance at a promotion. But when Clank in the computer... when I saw you three being tortured in that prison, I realized that this was a *real* war. I can't just sit back anymore." He holds up a missile launcher so large it almost makes the lombax tip over. "So what exactly is this?"

Slim smiles behind the booth. "You just picked up the biggest man-pad Stelcorp ever made. They call it 'Draco'. Basically, it shoots a huge missile at one target, and that missile itself has missile launchers. It pounds mini-missiles on everything the way. As I've been told, nothing's ever survived a direct hit from the main Draco missile."

Slim looks down at Clank. "So, you wanna pick up anything?"

Clank shakes his head. "I work with Ratchet, his weaponry is more than a match for the opposition. Besides, I re-installed my Shocker before leaving Bogon. A good thing, too, I had to use it on a couple of Ta'ree back in the prison."

With a *ssshnnnnllllllk*, Rusko de-cloaks directly next to a very surprised Ratchet. "Well, I'm done. Let's get the coordinates to a new processing center and go." His Teslatanium armor shines with a pattern of blue that reminds Ratchet of his green Aegis armor, and makes Cross think of something out of the movie *Tron*.

"I have the new coordinates, though the officer said they do not lead directly to a processing center." Clank mentions casually.

Rusko shrugs. "Well, guys. I'm ready when you are."

Felix slings a couple of Stelcorp weapons over his shoulders. "Me and the engineers have gone over the *Banshee*, they said they finished overhauling the torpedoes. We're ready to go."

21. Shipyard

Chapter 21: Shipyard

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Shipyards of Jormungand. 16 December, 18:42 Standard Time

...

In the now familiar twisting burst of light, the *Banshee* comes out of warp in the Jormungand system. Initially, nobody notices the emergence of the tiny ship, the shipyards are also a busy interstellar star-port, ships drop in and out of warp regularly. The system looms ahead of the compact Megacorp warship. The natural system itself is simple enough, a red giant burning at the center of the system. In a relatively close orbit rotates a small, terrestrial planet, baked into a hot wasteland by the near sun. Farther out is a striped jovian lacking any rings or natural moons.

However, the system's natural simplicity is overwhelmed by the man-made objects littering the beehive of activity. At least ten massive maintenance stations orbit the gas giant. Massive, ribbed spokes extend from the six-sided cores like legs on a spider. About a third of these ribbed spokes are occupied by various ships, some damaged and others just refueling.

About thirty large ships rumble through the system, an assortment from destroyers barely larger than the *Banshee* to capital ships as big as a super-carrier. Fortunately, the carrier jumps into warp before the lombax vessel receives any notice. Clank, sitting at his usual spot at communications, busily sorts through the plethora of signals. Finally, one is directed from the starport control to the *Banshee*.

"This is Traffic Control to unregistered vessel. We have approximately twenty-eight docks compatible with your ship, if you would please direct your course to the waiting area at coordinates two — three — two mark three — one — five mark zero — nine — four. While waiting for your dock number, you will be scanned by security patrols, please comply with all requests made by the customs officers, today Tak'sen interstellar ports are on yellow alert and security may board your vessel for inspection."

Angela turns her head to glance at Clank. “Ready with the virus Kanna sent us?”

Clank nods and activates the universal broadcast, transmitting a powerful computer virus on all frequencies. While the virus works, a couple of Customs courier ships approach the *Banshee*.

“Security to unregistered vessel, our sensors detect lombaxes aboard. Surrender and prepare to be boarded.”

Ratchet flicks a switch and grasps the control joystick. “Shields and point defense up, charging all weapons.”

Angela’s eyes grow as she sees a ship approach them close behind. “Ratchet, a battle frigate is coming up on our tail.”

“I see him. Locked on, firing a torpedo.”

Small ports slide open on the rear of the *Banshee*’s hull, reminiscent of torpedo tubes on submarines. A small light activates at the tip of the indentation, opening a miniscule hole in the shields. Then a smart torpedo blasts out of the first starboard tube directly at the frigate. In surprise, the frigate doesn’t have a chance to raise its shields before the torpedo impacts.

Instead of exploding in a brilliant yellow-orange fireball, the torpedo splatters against the frigate’s hull as if the projectile was made of putty. The frigate’s shields activate, but too late. The torpedo begins to dissolve, to outside appearances it melts into the target’s hull. Then the nanocite goes to work. Billions of microscopic robots tear at the molecular structure of the frigate’s alloy hull, converting it’s own armor into more nanocite. With exponential growth, what started as barely a scratch rapidly grows into a widening dent, and finally the entire frigate begins to dissolve away under the microscopic attack.

While the communications are disabled across the system thanks to the *Banshee* and hidden agents, the Ta’ree still notice one of their battle frigates dissolving into space dust behind the lombax vessel. Ships immediately scramble to the starport’s defense. Six destroyers and at least two full squadrons of star-fighters home in on the *Banshee*.

Angela watches the sensors light up with red ships converging on them. “We just stirred up the hornet’s nest!”

Rusko whips the *Banshee* around and Ratchet begins spraying the pulse-cannons at everything in front of the ship. Rusko pulls a hard right and accelerates towards the approaching pack of destroyers. The swivel-cannons thunder purple-blue fire into the destroyers as Ratchet waits for the few seconds until the computer locks on. Ablative armor

plates slide open and the forward missile tubes blaze into life, sending flurries of missiles into the Ta'ree ships.

Three of the destroyers break off and approach the *Banshee's* port side, attempting to take advantage of a perceived weakness in fire arcs. Rusko pulls a sharp loop, turning the ship to face the three new ships. Ratchet thumbs a new trigger, and the weapon pods on the end of the *Banshee's* wings slide open. They start draining power and a burning cyan-white glow appears at the newly exposed emitters on the warship's wingtips. With a blast so powerful it even shakes the *Banshee*, the weapons fire. In Ratchet's headset, the computer blandly states, "Ion Cannons firing."

The display is anything but bland. The port beam smashes dead-on into the left-most destroyer, blitzing through its shields and nearly vaporizing the vessel. The starboard cannon's beam slices through the forward destroyer's shields, cutting a deep gouge in the small Ta'ree ship. The beam continues into the second ship, smashing through that one's shields and blasting open its engines; even continuing through that ship to dissipate into space. The core goes critical and overloads in seconds, blasting not only that ship, but the remnants of the lead destroyer.

Ratchet smiles widely, "I have *got* to get me one of these." Rusko whips the *Banshee* around with an agility that seems almost impossible for such a heavily armed ship. Pulse-cannons resume fire. Now a missile cruiser has locked onto the *Banshee*, it unloads a volley of thirty deadly missiles.

Rusko spins the ship towards this new threat and sends the ship into a barrel roll as he rockets towards it. Ratchet unleashes another volley of missiles just as theirs come into range. The *Banshee* sprays gattling laser fire at the incoming missile; four of the large, guided projectiles hit but Rusko's angles the *Banshee* to only take glancing blows. Ratchet's missile volley strikes the missile cruiser, but its shields take the blow without flickering.

Rusko brings the *Banshee* onto the missile cruiser's ventral side, since most of the ship's missile tubes are side-facing. The Ta'ree ship unleashes another volley and Ratchet responds with the *Banshee's* own missiles. Rusko kicks on the afterburners and begins a corkscrew towards the cruiser. Star-fighters, following the lombax ship, spit laser fire, but Rusko's evasive piloting and the self-regenerating shields prevent damage. The cruiser's missiles approach and the *Banshee's* laser point-defense opens fire full-force, almost a dozen flattened domes spraying laser bolts like a dragon breathing fire.

Despite Rusko's piloting, this time three missiles slam dead-on into the *Banshee*, cutting a chunk out of the shield strength and rocking the pocket warship. Rusko resumes the accelerated flight towards the cruiser as the Ta'ree ship continues to slowly turn towards the Megacorp-built vessel. Flares burst from the tubes and another missile volley streaks towards the lombax ship.

The *Banshee* shakes as the determined star-fighters following it unleash a timed volley of missiles, but the shields hold. Missiles streak through space as they curve in to smash into the *Banshee*'s port side. Then Rusko gets an idea. He reduces the engines to high cruising speed and begins zig-zagging to evade the small fire from the star-fighters. The missiles adjust to the *Banshee*'s reduction in speed and race to intercept.

Moments before they crash against the *Banshee*'s weakening shields, Rusko hits the afterburners and rockets forward. Most of the missiles are unable to compensate and miss the lombax vessel, instead smashing into a few of the star-fighters following it. Eight missiles curve about, still homing in on the *Banshee*. Rusko begins a barrel roll and dives, giving every point-defense a shot at the missiles. All eight explode.

Finally, the compact warship is close enough to the cruiser to allow Ratchet to unleash the primary weapons. Purple-blue erupts into the missile cruiser's shields, but the ship is too powerful for the *Banshee*'s typical weapons. Frowning, Ratchet reaches his thumbs and fires the Ion Cannons. The lights dim and pulse-guns cease fire as energy is shunted into the incredibly powerful energy weapons at the ends of the tiny warship's wings.

Throughout the lombax ship, the main lights go out entirely. Angela looks up at the now dark lighting strips, then back up to see that displays all over the bridge are shutting off. Rusko, wrestling with the controls, suddenly stops. "Cross? I just lost engines."

Angela looks at her sensor screens as they blink out. "An automatic program, it looks like all of the energy is being shunted to the weapons."

Ratchet looks at the central screen at his station as two separate crosshairs converge on one point on the Ta'ree cruiser. "I can think of two right off the top of my head." Systems blink out over the ship as the vessel sends all available power to the Ion Cannons to automatically adjust to the strength of the target.

Both of the Ion Cannons lock onto the antimatter storage of the

missile cruiser. For the briefest of moments, it seems like a quiet pause spreads over the entire universe. Then the weapons unleash into the cruiser. A stream of bright, blinding, almost blue light erupts from the two weapons pods on the *Banshee's* wingtips, the light alone so powerful it almost seems to engulf the *Banshee*.

The three lombaxes on the bridge shield their eyes, even Clank squints and turns away. Power flickers back to normal and the main view screen blinks. The Ta'ree cruiser now holds one gaping hole, plasma spraying from severed conduits. Angela sweeps the sensors over the cruiser and her eyes go wide as the others notice escape pods blasting from the ship. "Rusko, get us out of here!"

The door at the rear of the bridge opens and Felix steps in just as Rusko whips the *Banshee* around and kicks the engines to maximum. Felix crashes into the doorway and grabs on to steady himself as they flee from the cruiser, already firing another missile volley at them. A few seconds tick down as other ships race away from the missile cruiser before the Ta'ree vessel's damaged antimatter storage fails. Antimatter floods into the ship, engulfing it in another huge explosion, this time fully blowing the ship into two huge halves and sending debris everywhere.

Now Felix, still hanging onto both sides of the doorway, shouts, "What the hell are you guys doing? You just about blew every capacitor in the ship with whatever stunt you pulled a few seconds ago!"

"Ratchet just used the Ion Cannons to take out a capital ship." Rusko slows down and is about to turn the *Banshee* around to look for more Ta'ree ships when his ship shudders from enemy fire. *That was easy.* He spins around to see the destroyers firing missiles at long distance, possibly hoping to stand outside Ion Cannon range. "Hey, Ratchet."

"I got it." The computer rapidly beeps as it locks on. Ratchet engages the missiles and the ablative plates slide open again to unleash another volley of missiles. All of the missiles converge on one destroyer, knocking out its shields and blowing it apart, sending pieces of its raritanium interior flying. Rusko whips the ship around and Felix crashes into the wall again. He gives up on trying to hold on in the doorway and retreats to the engines.

Rusko continues flying the *Banshee* through the now relatively lightly defended starport, Ratchet spraying pulse-cannon fire at starfighters. As Rusko weaves around a ribbed spoke of one of the docking stations, he asks Angela, "Hey, are those stations shielded?"

“No.”

Ratchet flips a switch and the rear sensors target the station they just flew past. He unleashes a pair of torpedoes, which smash into two separate ribs. With frightening speed, the nanocite begins consuming the station.

Ratchet looks back at the central displays to see that there are almost no active Ta’ree ships left in the system, after the missile cruiser exploded an evacuation signal was sent. Angela answers the question before he can even ask it, “The Ta’ree are retreating.”

Rusko brings up another station on Ratchet’s targeting screen. Clank, since there are no communications signals beaming across the system, joins Angela at sensors. “Ratchet, before you fire on that station, there is an undamaged bulk freighter docked there. It appears that the station’s escape pods have been jettisoned.”

“Let’s capture it.”

Ratchet and Rusko are so surprised by Angela’s suggestion that they both turn around in their swiveling chairs to stare at her. Angela rolls her eyes. “Does anybody remember how badly things went the last time we tried to infiltrate a processing center? We need to use a less brute way to get into it. Has anybody ever read Greek mythology?”

Ratchet and Rusko simultaneously shake their heads and Angela sighs. However, Clank understands what she is planning. “We will steal their ship, hide the *Banshee* inside, and use their own ship to infiltrate their facility undetected. According the files my self in the computer transmitted, the Ta’ree have life-sensors that can differentiate lombaxes from humans, but they regularly have lombaxes fill lower-level positions.”

Angela nods. “There were some Ta’ree ships left, but they fled the system. They might bring reinforcements, so we’ll have to work quickly. Let’s board that station so Clank can hack the mainframe and find those new coordinates.”

22. Trojan Horse

Chapter 22: Trojan Horse

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Kasir System. 7 January, 09:11 Standard Time

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A bright flash of light bursts into being midway in the Kasir System, and a Ta'ree bulk freighter drops out of warp in the middle of the system. The system is relatively simple. One tiny, scorched planet orbits close to an ordinary yellow sun. Quite a ways beyond that is a large terrestrial planet, mostly covered in water with pockets of land somewhere in between an island and small continent in size. Past that planet, beyond the point where the freighter dropped out of warp, lies a sparse asteroid belt, and beyond that is a brilliantly ringed gas giant.

The gray, blocky cargo transport lumbers as quickly as Ratchet can push the engines towards the second planet in the system. Ratchet mutters complaints under his breath at the unresponsive trackball controls. Angela sits in the skipper's chair, with a bored expression on her face as she watches the large, green-spotted-blue planet grow on the shoddy main view screen. Felix, who had been lounging at the sensors station, now sits up in his absurdly tall and bulky chair to scan the approaching Ta'ree ships. Since the chair is slightly too far away from the controls, Clank stands on the edge of the communications workstation. Rusko, going over his equipment on the *Banshee*, is absent from the freighter's bridge.

As the freighter nears the planet, four Manta fighters approach and communications blink to indicate an incoming signal. Clank opens the channel. "This is Kasir traffic control to Bulk Freighter 117. Please pull into high planetary orbit to await scans. An insurgent war fleet has been attacking Detention Facilities and shipyards, so all military and correctional facilities are on yellow alert."

Knowing that the "insurgent war fleet" refers to them, Ratchet, Felix, and Angela all snicker and struggle to suppress laughter. Clank sends a 'sober up' look at them and looks back to his station.

Clank opens a channel to send in response. "This is Bulk Freighter

117, automated systems confirming orders. Moving to high planetary orbit.”

Ratchet complies and takes the ship into the specified orbit. Several fighters take flanking positions beside the freighter and others fly at a greater distance, ready to open fire if anything suspicious happens. After a few seconds, a few Mantas turn towards the freighter.

“Tower to Bulk Freighter 117, you are cleared to descend. Landing pad sixteen has been set for your arrival, cargo transfer systems should be ready by the time you arrive.”

“Bulk Freighter 117 confirming orders. Landing at planet port pad sixteen.” Clank cuts the transmission. Felix checks the sensors to be sure the Mantas leave the freighter before giving a thumbs-up. Clank chuckles. “Nothing to it.”

...

Detention Compound, Kasir System. 7 January, 11:15 Standard Time

...

In the Ta’ree sector of the detention facility buzzes a busy computer workroom. Eight work stations, each with a standard Ta’ree layout of a wide keyboard, trackball, and six monitors hum in the blandly white-painted, moderately lit room. At one of the stations, two of the six screens are off. Another replays one of Clank’s memories on the flying prison on Planet Aranos, just after watching a short message from the powerful entar, Cross. Another two screens, ignored, replay memories of Clank filming the ‘Secret Agent Clank’ holovids. The fourth replays a view of a fight from behind the bars of a cage on a flying train on Metropolis.

One of the nearby Ta’ree leans back in his chair and smiles good-naturedly at the official once the warden of Mos Llenar. “Hey, Bantar. How’s it going looking through that insurgent hacking machine’s memories?”

Bantar sighs and slams his finger down on the ‘pause’ button before he leans back and rubs the bridge of his nose. *Damn it, this isn’t getting me anywhere. Nothing worth my time on these lomban.* “I hate those lomban vermin. Aside from this robot with delusions of grandeur, I haven’t even discovered any of their enemies that they haven’t killed.”

The other Ta’ree shrugs. “Well, you know what they say. ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend.’ Maybe you should transmit the report to the base commander. I know he was expecting a report,

probably hoping for an ally against the lomban insurgents.”

Bantar rolls his eyes and resumes ignoring his surroundings, turning back to the monitors. He hits the ‘play’ button and the voice of the robot in the fourth screen draws his attention.

“...I must admit, you’ve been a far more worthy adversary than that imbecile Qwark.” The tall, red-eyed robot laughs. “It’s a shame you won’t live long enough to see the rest of your kind exterminated.” The lombax curls his lips in a snarl.

Bantar sighs again. “I don’t know if this robot ‘Nefarious’ is worth reporting, and I still haven’t found anything on these guerillas.”

“We have.” Bantar pauses the replay and turns around in surprise at the voice who spoke behind him. A Ta’ree, the warden of this compound, stands next to the chair, glancing at the screens and looking about as unimpressed as Bantar. He holds a data pad in his hand, and after a moment of bored glancing at the four images frozen in freeze-frame, he hands it to Bantar. The pad’s screen contains a slightly grainy black and white surveillance image taken by one of the automated security cameras in the spaceport.

He instantly recognizes the lombax as Felix. *“HIM!”*

“Indeed,” the commander dryly states. “I’m still waiting on that report. And yes, I am interested in hearing about that ‘robot Nefarious’ in your report. As soon as you finish up here, report to the armory and take care of those insurgents.”

“With pleasure.” Bantar turns back around and hits the ‘play’ button, eager to finish his report and get his rifle to take care of business himself. Though a warden now, he began his career as a sniper in the Tak’sen Army.

The commander turns around and walks with measured pace out of the room. *Hmmm, ‘Nefarious’. A ridiculous name, but... a plan to exterminate the lomban species. Very ambitious. He seems to hold almost as much resentment for lombans as we do.* He smiles. *I’ll have to send a ship to investigate this ‘Nefarious’.*

...

Spaceport on Kasir System. 7 January, 11:00 Standard Time

...

The blocky cargo transport breaks through the cloud cover of the overcast sky, rumbling towards the landing pad on the outskirts of the port, fortunately on the near side by the detention processing facility.

Trundling over the thin forest in between the compound and the port, it slows to a stop and lowers itself vertically to the open pad. Felix opens most of the cargo bay doors and automated cargo movers roll up to the opening hatches and begin shuttling supplies to a nearby warehouse cluster.

After the freighter is taken care of, he and Ratchet get up and go join Angela and Rusko in the *Banshee*, hidden in one of the sealed, cavernous cargo compartments. Ratchet takes the lone hallway straight there, but Felix slips into one of the open cargo bays to make sure that none of the ‘automated’ cargo movers are manned by Ta’ree with sensors looking for the *Banshee*. After a quick glance, he is satisfied that the groaning, yellow machines are genuinely just cargo movers and he joins the others.

Ratchet and the others sit in the *Banshee*’s bridge, going through their equipment. Rusko finishes a diagnostic on his Cuttlefish Cloak and checks his belt-mounted energy-weapon capacitor for the eighth time to be sure it is fully charged.

Rusko has his armor donned and fully checked. After attaching his grapple gun he stands up. “Since I’m the only one with a cloaking device, I’m going to go out scouting.” He looks to Ratchet. “Since I’m not very good with hacking, d’ya mind if I bring Clank?”

Ratchet shrugs an affirmative and returns to checking over his N90, more of his Gagetron weaponry on the floor beside him. Clank walks up and Rusko turns around to exit. Clank hops onto Rusko’s back as he always does with Ratchet. However, Rusko is not Ratchet.

Not expecting the robot to suddenly strap himself to his back, he jumps so high his ears touch the ceiling and his head narrowly misses. “Whoa! Clank!” Rusko tries to turn around to see Clank, but just ends up spinning in a circle and causing Ratchet, Angela, and Felix to laugh uproariously.

Ratchet, clutching his stomach with one hand and breathing heavily from laughing at Rusko, finally manages to breathe out, “Clank goes strapped on my back like that all the time. Just think of him as an ordinary backpack.”

“Ratchet!”

Both Ratchet and Angela chuckle and after a moment of looking confused, Rusko leaves the bridge and walks into the airlock. The inner door closes and Rusko activates his cloaking device. He vanishes with the Cuttlefish Cloak’s patented *ssshnnnnllllllk*, also making the attached Clank disappear. He taps the control panel to open the outer

hatch and instead of waiting for the ramp to extend, he simply takes a long, diving jump out of the airlock.

Twisting through the air, Rusko lands without a sound, perfectly balanced. Clank is surprised by the rush of movement and makes a small noise of surprise. Rusko tries to turn around to look at Clank and speak to him, only remembering that Clank is strapped to his back and not following after making another full three-hundred sixty degree turn.

Ratchet and Angela, still watching from the sensors in the *Banshee*, break out into another round of laughter.

Rusko ignores the sensation that he's being laughed at, instead asking Clank, "Surprised? All silksteel armor enhances its wearer's movement capabilities. I bet I could jump about as high with just my armor as Ratchet could with a burst from your jet pack."

Clank switches to his jet pack mode and looks at his wing arms, noticing that even though he is within the cloaking field he has trouble seeing them. "This 'silksteel' armor of yours is quite impressive. Is there anything about this armor I should know?"

As he heads to the ladder to climb out of the cargo hold and through a smaller exit, he answers. "Well, silksteel is resistant to energy weapons. Gear can hook directly into the armor and use a nanomite-tractoring device to speed up battlefield upgrades. Silksteel joints have negative-feedback, so I can go farther and harder without stopping. Mine has a cloaking device that makes us invisible to sensors, but it only dampens sound so far, so try to be quiet, okay?"

"Understood."

Rusko sprints with effortless ease across the two kilometers of sparse forest to the processing compound, using his grapple to scale two perimeter walls of the lightly-guarded, unsuspecting facility as he makes his way to the Ta'ree mainframe. Unlike last time, his Cuttlefish Cloak works perfectly, and he crosses the western courtyard undetected.

The reinforced concrete structure looms ahead of him, the ground floor jutting out a little to create several sections of balconies four meters up. Rusko puts away his grapple canon and leaps up the four meter distance onto one balcony without even using a burst from Clank. After using his keycard hack, Rusko slips into the less-well-guarded third floor and slinks his way to the mainframe, avoiding a few guard patrols. Again using his keycard hack, he slips into the mainframe.

Unfortunately, the good luck ends here. A Ta'ree entar technician is sitting in front of the supercomputer workstation, and when the security door opens and he doesn't hear anyone enter, he turns around warily. "Hello?"

Rusko freezes, hoping that if he remains absolutely still, the Ta'ree won't be able to see the subtle visual distortion of the cloaking field's outline, a nearly imperceptible silhouette. What feels like a millennia stretches and Rusko bites his lip. The door behind him, sensing nothing in its way, slides shut, almost catching Rusko's armor-clad tail.

The Ta'ree squints in the brightly lit room. *I can't see anything, but I feel someone here.* He leans forward centimeters from Rusko. Unfortunately, one of the things lombaxes improved from humans to Ta'ree was vision. The technician's enhanced eyes see the vague ripple of the cloaking field. "...the hell? Is that a cloaking—"

Rusko launches forward, grasping the Ta'ree's head with both hands. With a quick jerk, he snaps the technician's neck and lets the body fall to the ground. Another second passes and no alarms blare. Rusko releases the breath he hadn't realized he had been holding and steps calmly over the technician's body to begin searching through the computer. Clank removes himself from Rusko's back and hops onto the chair, mildly disturbed with how easily Rusko continued on from killing a man with his bare hands. He clenches a fist when the network is slower to update than he expects.

"Hello, Henderson? Are you finished with your diagnostic of the field circuits in section 17?"

Rusko almost jumps in surprise from the voice that projects from an intercom extending from the wall right next to the huge mainframe monitor. He hits the 'mute' with the force of panic and hisses, "Clank, did you hear enough of the technician's voice to mimic it?"

Clank looks with surprise at Rusko. He had never before tried to impersonate a person on such short notice . . . "I think so, but I've n
—"

"Good enough." Rusko hits the 'send' button on the audio-only intercom and motions anxiously to Clank.

Clank sends a helpless look at Rusko, then looks to the intercom. Answering in the technician's voice, Clank replies, "Henderson here. I'm almost done. You made me slip there. I've got another diagnostic to run on the computer core, the chief said the network connection was a little slower than normal. I'll call in when I finish."

“I was wondering if you were going to take a look at that voluntarily or wait until someone ordered you to. I’m glad to see that you’re finally getting off your lazy butt, private.” The voice chuckles and cuts out. Rusko and Clank both let out a sigh of relief.

Clank hops onto the chair and begins tapping at the keyboard to open the network, but a password window pops open. Rusko growls instinctively and Clank sighs. “It appears I will have to use a direct data cable connection.” He opens a tiny flap at the top of his head, near his antenna, then draws a cable from the computer station just as he did from Mos Llenar — hoping that they don’t include a digital trap like last time. After plugging in, he quickly bypasses the security program. *The Ta’ree seem to have quite poor hack protection against intelligent robots.* The screen begins exploding with the data files that Clank sorts through.

Mos Llenar. Capacity: 3000 prisoners, 150 personnel. Current: 0 prisoners, 5 personnel. A recent prison break has killed the majority of the staff and allowed the prisoners to escape. Surviving personnel have been moved to other facilities. Insurgents appear to have stolen a Megacorp-built vessel and used it to break through the defenses. A picture of the *Banshee*, roaring in with guns blazing, appears next to the text. **Critical prisoner: Cross Angela.** This prisoner passed sensor limits of 256 kilokets; at such a powerful entar she should be considered extremely dangerous whether armed or not. A picture of Angela, in the bright orange prisoner uniform before entering the dank, brutal facility, appears in a box below the *Banshee*.

Chinde. Capacity: 8000 prisoners, 400 personnel. Current: 7400 prisoners, 279 personnel. A recent influx of insurgents from the Jolinar system has filled the facility beyond the recommended prisoner-guard ratio, please divert any prisoners to alternate facilities until further personnel arrive: Kanto, Mos Tu’ran, Mages An.

“You are searching by prisoner names, not by prison, right? We may go through every gulag in Falnar if we go at it that way.” Rusko crosses his arms impatiently.

“I apologize, basic detention camp data was easier to break and came up first. Give me a moment, I am working on the prisoner data.” After a few seconds of working, prisoner profiles begin to blink up on the screen and proceed at an increasing pace. Rusko rolls his eyes and turns away to check the local security systems on another panel and be sure they haven’t been caught.

Aráto Maru.

Age: 71.

Height: 135 centimeters.

Weight: 108 kilograms.

Aráto Miadora.

Age: 22.

Height: 140 centimeters.

Weight: 102 kilograms.

Aráto Miiksha.

Age: 6.

Height: 98 centimeters.

Weight: 40 kilograms.

Born: 8 June 4157.

Arrested: 9 June 4163.

Terminated: 11 June 4163.

Clank quickly skips to the next profile. Unfortunately, Rusko has finished his security check and noticed peripherally that Clank had paused on one profile before suddenly skipping to the next one without telling him. “What’s up, Clank? Did you find something?”

Aráto Miororu.

Age: 18.

Height: 119 centimeters.

Weight: 98 kilograms.

“Clank, you skipped past her. Miiksha has a double ‘i’ in roman script.” Clank stops and looks down, sorry to have tried to hide the truth from Rusko but uncertain if he should tell him. Rusko doesn’t miss the action. “What is it?”

“Maybe we should continue searching for your wife. How did you spell her name again?”

Rusko shoots a look at Clank that clearly expresses he’s not buying the little robot’s routine, and he is *very* unamused. “Clank, what did you find? This is serious, don’t try pulling a joke when my family’s on the line.”

Clank sighs. With great reluctance, he backs up a profile.

Aráto Miiksha.

Age: 6.

Height: 98 centimeters.

Weight: 40 kilograms.

Born: 8 June 4157.

Arrested: 9 June 4163.

Terminated: 11 June 4163.

Charged with: aiding and abetting insurgents, possession of explosive ingredients, assault on Ta'ree peacekeepers.

Details: Prisoner was involved in a small prison riot involving eleven other insurgents. In order to safely dispel the riot, security forces were forced to use small-arms fire.

Rusko carefully scans the cold, emotionless text lines again. His insides feel like they are tearing each other apart, and a terrible feeling of . . . wrongness begins to settle heavily on his shoulders.

Terminated: 11 June 4163.

"No." Rusko stumbles backwards. "No, it can't be." Rusko desperately wishes that the computer would change, that it was a lie, but Ta'ree computers have no reason to lie. Rusko sucks in a breath and blinks, trying to will away that terrible line.

Meanwhile, Clank resumes searching through profiles at super speed to find Ranaia. "Rusko, I am sorry for—"

"Shut up! Shut up you little metal monster. I have *not* been searching for my family for almost five years just for them to be dead!" Rusko's voice cracks and Clank can easily see the lombax's eyes tearing as he turns away. Rusko flicks his claws out and lashes out at the workstation beside him, but drops to his knees after one swing.

Clank holds out his hands, trying to think of something to say to comfort the Falnarian in finding out that his daughter is dead. He can't quite think of anything. The search ends. "Ra—"

Rusko turns back to Clank. "I'm sorry, you didn't do any of this. It's not your fault. I... I should probably get you back to the ship. Ratchet's probably waiting for you."

Clank nods, accepting that as good enough for now, not picking up on Rusko making no mention of *him* returning. He hops up and straps himself to Rusko's back. Rusko activates his cloaking device and steps out the door with a notable trudge to his pace.

...

Processing Center, Kasir System. 7 January, 11:48 Standard Time

...

Rusko plods from the building and uses his grapple to ascend the inner perimeter wall. He wearily makes his way to the outer perimeter wall and begins ascending that. Unfortunately, the moment his

grapple hooks onto the concrete at a protruding ledge high up on the tower, rotating red lights activate and klaxons blare. Speakers click on and a voice shouts, "Insurgent in the perimeter! Watch for cloaked commando!"

Rusko doesn't bother to listen to it, or the elevators in the wall towers as guards ascend to sweep the compound. The Teslatanium-clad Shadow Commando clambers over the inner side of the wall and retracts his grapple before aiming for a point below on the outside. A trained guard senses his presence and shouts before firing at Rusko's general vicinity, but too late. Rusko escapes the compound.

Rusko hits the ground and clips the compact grapple gun to his waist in an automatic motion. He breaks into a sprint and the air whistles past them. Clank's olfactory sensors detect salt as Rusko runs at breakneck speed towards the open forest.

"Rusko?" Suddenly, Clank sees a mine of some sort pop out of the ground, having detected Rusko's proximity by his heavy footsteps. It rockets up and bursts about twenty centimeters above the ground, sending a sticky, phosphorescent material all over he and Rusko. *This is not good.* Thinking quickly, Clank sends a distress signal to the *Banshee*.

Rusko doesn't even seem to notice that he was splashed with a glowing substance that resists the cloak field's attempts to hide it. However, even through his despair, his sensitive lombax ears can't help but hear Ta'ree forces converging on his position, following the trail of phosphorescent footprints to the dripping, semi-invisible figure. Despite Clank's earlier observations of Rusko's natural aggressiveness, instead of whipping out a weapon and unloading fire into the Ta'ree, he continues to run towards the spaceport.

The ground begins to rumble and a small tank, racing through the wide space between the trees and crashing through the smaller ones, turns its turret and fires a rocket propelled grenade.

...

Space port, Kasir System. 7 January, 12:00 Standard Time

...

Ratchet, Angela, and Felix lounge in the bridge of the *Banshee*, waiting for Rusko and Clank to return with the next coordinates to the gulag where Rusko's family is held. Since there were no signs of trouble as Rusko entered the processing center, none of them suspect any mishaps.

Angela is sitting at the communications station, leaning back in the chair with her arms crossed behind her head. Ratchet leans back in the chair at tactical, also relaxed. Felix sits in the chair at sensors, fidgeting in boredom and glancing at the door. He starts to stand up, motioning as if to head to the airlock.

Angela sighs and sits up, putting her arms down. “Felix, will you stop doing that? They’re just automated cargo trucks, there’s no Ta’ree out there. Stop going out to check, there’s nothing to worry about. Nothing’s going to happen—”

Lights at the communications station blink and the workstation starts beeping with an incoming distress signal. Everybody snaps up, especially Felix, who almost jumps into the ceiling. Angela analyzes the signal. “It’s Clank, they’re in trouble! We need to go!”

Ratchet straps himself into his seat at tactical and Angela quickly leaps up and rushes to the pilot’s seat as Felix fumbles with his straps at the sensors station. Felix whips the chair around and turns around while still sitting. “There may be some Ta’ree near the landing pad. And this ship doesn’t have one of Rusko’s fancy cloaking devices, they’re going to notice a Megacorp warship blasting out of a bulk freighter.” As Felix transmits an ‘open’ command to the bulk freighter holding them, Ratchet charges the weapons.

Ratchet grips the weapons joystick as he looks up at Angela. “The trick was bound to fail eventually. Let’s just go get our friends out of whatever they got into.”

Felix nods and looks forward as the freighter responds. Gigantic hull plates slide open as the enormous compartment of the freighter slides open nosily, metal and motors whining but working quickly. Angela doesn’t wait for the plates to lock open, as soon as the doors are open wide enough to accommodate the *Banshee*, she blasts the ship out.

Small anti-air fire pulses at them from a small turret near the warehouse cluster. An alert goes up in the spaceport and Ta’ree fighters scramble. Several armored fighting vehicles, which had been heading towards the prison, stop with a screech and spin around to engage the surprise entrant.

Ratchet blasts all four with the pulse-cannons as Angela kicks the impulse-thrusters to maximum. The *Banshee* rockets up and eastward towards the distress signal. A few seconds pass and they near enough to see a helicopter targeting its rocket pods on a mysterious, semi-invisible figure splashed with glowing green goop.

Ratchet hits the thumb trigger and sends a missile into the gunship just as it begins to unload its rocket pods. The helicopter explodes spectacularly and the three nearby tanks whip around to engage the new threat. Felix, not strapped in, grabs his weapon and heads for the door. "Take a flyby! I'll jump out!"

Ratchet almost turns in his chair to look at Felix. "Are you insane! Those—"

"Rusko is out there, and so is your robot friend, Clank! I'm gonna go help them!" Felix exits the bridge and opens the airlock.

Angela passes over the battlefield, a largely clear hill, and Felix jumps out with a rocket launcher in hand. Tanks fire on the *Banshee*, but the few RPGs that hit cause minimal damage that the self-regenerating shields repair anyway.

Ratchet sprays the pulse-cannons and takes out another tank, but the targets are getting too close to the goop-covered figure he assumes is Rusko. He growls, then starts un-strapping himself. "I'm going out, too. Fly cover!"

Angela nods and hits a series of commands on the workstation. A plate on the underside of the *Banshee*'s nose slides open and a gattling cannon extends. Angela looks side to side with her headset on to test it, and the turret follows her head's movements. She squeezes the trigger and the turret roars blue-purple fire.

Ratchet runs out on the still-extended exit ramp with his N90 in hand. The ground rushes by uncomfortably fast, and he swallows. Just before he gathers the courage to leap, a huge laser bolt strikes the *Banshee*, knocking Ratchet off the extended ramp.

He hits the ground hard but rolls. An APC swings its turret at him and Ratchet opens fire. The shots ping off the armor, cutting small gouges but not penetrating. Then a burst of Megarocket missiles smash into the turret, blasting it off and setting off secondary explosions in the munitions. Ratchet waves a 'thanks' to Felix and switches to his Decimator rocket launcher.

Another huge beam of energy strikes through the sky above and strikes the *Banshee*. Approaching from the space port is the largest walking machine Ratchet has ever seen. A mammoth vehicle towering almost ten meters tall, it has four legs at the corners on remarkably flexible ball-socket joints. On the top is a huge turret with twin cannons on either side, struggling to track the *Banshee* as Angela shuffles across the sky, spraying gattling fire at it.

Felix nods at Ratchet and jerks his head towards the smaller tanks. Felix kneels down and withdraws a massive rocket launcher. The Stelcorp Draco multi-missile. Felix targets the lumbering, mammoth vehicle and Ratchet lets loose six rockets to cover him. Two miss, but the other four rockets find their tanks and blast the Ta'ree vehicles into debris.

Felix's launcher finally finishes acquiring the target. It lets loose another blast at the *Banshee*, and the Megacorp ship's shields flicker, it's engines almost fail. Felix squeezes the trigger and the missile leaps out of the launcher, the kickback hitting Felix like an angry mule. The missile roars into the air, spitting off mini-missiles at every Ta'ree vehicle it can lock onto. Then it slams into the target.

The initial impact is so strong it makes the Ta'ree walker shudder and pause. The Draco missile shatters the forward armor plate and drills into the vehicle before detonating its antimatter warhead. The walker explodes in a fireball any nuclear weapon would be proud of, shards of metal debris flinging outwards. The remaining hulk stumbles to the ground.

Angela brings the *Banshee* down, angling the ship so the end of the still-extended ramp is next to Ratchet. The lombax scrambles to grab Rusko, his cloaking device apparently deactivated with the heavy damage the armor took. Angela shouts from the pilot's seat, "Hurry up, shields are almost gone and we've got company!"

Megacorp Manta-cloass fighters scream through the sky at the lombaxes. Felix sprints into the *Banshee* and Ratchet pulls Rusko, battered and bleeding, towards the ramp. As soon as they get on, Angela brings the *Banshee* back into the air.

Ratchet continues to half-drag Rusko by the arm. The wounded Falnarian weakly orders Clank, "Go, get in the ship." Rusko collapses but continues to crawl towards the airlock and Ratchet sprints inside.

Clank hops off Rusko's back and enters the ship just as it begins to pass over the spaceport. The bulk freighter races by underneath as Angela pulls the *Banshee* into a steep rise. Unfortunately, Rusko can't hold on and he allows himself to slide off the ramp.

Felix, who had been waiting for him, shouts, "Rusko! Angela, bring us back down!"

Felix plummets through the air towards the warehouse cluster. He strikes the sloped, flat metal roof hard, denting the sturdy metal. He coughs blood and continues to roll and slide across the roof, momentum quickly carrying him off the roof. He falls almost ten

meters before his momentum smashes him into the wall of an adjacent warehouse.

The lombax glances off the metal wall and crashes into the ground in a daze, breaking even more bones on contact with the oil-stained concrete ground. He lies there, bleeding, unable to get up because of the combination of blunt-force-induced daze and despair.

Above, Angela brings the *Banshee* into a dive, juking left and breaking into a corkscrew to avoid the full thirty squadron of star-fighters relentlessly peppering the *Banshee* with fire and missiles whenever they can get a lock on the agile lombax ship. As Ratchet watches Angela invert the *Banshee* and slide into a rocker, he almost whistles at how good her piloting skills are. *She's almost as good as me.*

Another series of missile hits strike the *Banshee*, and Angela makes a dive. Ratchet and Felix both hop up and head to the airlock. Clank is about to join Ratchet when Angela whips the *Banshee* around, sending Clank flying through the air into the seat at weapons. Ratchet turns his head to see Clank in the chair at tactical. "Stay there, Clank! You fly our air cover!"

Clank nods and pulls the waist restraint strap across to keep himself in the chair. Ratchet and Felix hop out of the airlock, rolling as they hit the ground to avoid taking injury. A tank turns the corner and meets one of Ratchet's Decimator missiles dead-on. Some blaster fire strikes the ground near his feet and Ratchet hops to the side and looks up at its source: Ta'ree gunners on the roof of the warehouse.

Ratchet whips out his N90 and returns fire as he backs up, sending the Ta'ree ducking for cover. Above him, a star-fighter bursts under fire from the *Banshee*'s pulse-cannons, and Angela turns the gattling turret on the roof-going Ta'ree to give Ratchet some cover fire. Another tank turns a corner and shoots an RPG at Ratchet and Felix, but the shot is high and it passes over their heads. Felix whips around and unleashes a pair of Megarockets into it. Another two finish it off. Ratchet and Felix unload more fire into the next wave of vehicles, and just before the wave ends...

...Ratchet's gun clicks. *Crap! I'm outta ammo!* He looks to Felix, but the engineer by trade is drawing another weapon, indicating he's also out of heavy ammunition. Ratchet activates his helmet's radio to the *Banshee*. "Angela, we need a little more help down here!"

"Hold on, I'll join you. Clank, take nav!"

The *Banshee* dips low in the alleys between the warehouses and the ramp begins to retract. Angela summersaults off, kicking off the wall

to come to a nimble landing to make a ninja jealous. Clank takes the *Banshee* back up and continues firing on the star-fighters and what few vehicles he can lock onto without chancing hurting Ratchet.

The moment Angela's feet hit the ground, she whips out a Stelcorp Hydra and lets loose a salvo of missiles on the nearest Ta'ree tank. The blow knocks off armor plating, but it takes a second squeeze of the trigger and the next volley to blow it to pieces. Angela tosses the weapon to Ratchet and draws what looks like a simple bazooka. Four vehicles later, the three finally turn back to recovering Rusko.

The moment the vehicles are taken care of, Felix jogs to Rusko and kneels down to check his pulse. He stands up and shouts excitedly at the approaching Ratchet and Angela. "He's alive, but just barely!"

Angela and Ratchet arrive. She kneels down to pick up Rusko and Felix jogs around next to the warehouse wall to get into a better position to help by taking Rusko's right arm. Suddenly, blood splatters across the wall next to Felix's head and he falls into the concrete wall. A dazed expression spreads on his face.

Angela reacts instinctively. She starts to turn and shouts, "Sniper!" Just before she can hop up, the Ta'ree takes a hasty shot at her. The bullet misses her skull, but passes through her ear, tearing out most of it. Angela roars and swings her Flux Rifle up and fires in one fluid motion automatically. Her bullet streaks through the air and passes through Bantar's sniper scope.

Ratchet watches in shock as Felix falls against the wall and slides down, leaving a bloody smear. The next thing he sees is Angela taking out the sniper. Fortunately, he recovers quickly. "Angela! Help me get Rusko." He taps on his helmet to open a channel to the *Banshee*. "Clank, are you okay?"

"I have eliminated the last of the star-fighters. Either there are no more at this spaceport or the Ta'ree have decided to stop sending forces against us. However, I do not believe that we have much time. I will be landing shortly." The *Banshee* roars overhead and comes around, slowly coming to rest at the clearing just a few meters away, at the edge of the warehouse cluster.

Ratchet and Angela drag Rusko into the *Banshee* as quickly as they can. Ratchet, at the front, opens the door to the bridge and backs into the doorway to give Rusko more room. Angela closes the airlock and checks Rusko's pulse again. Despite the blood and grievous wounds, nanogland is helping the blood to clot and seal the wounds and his heart hasn't stopped beating yet.

As Ratchet and Angela carefully remove his armor to apply bandages and medical nanotech canisters, Rusko gurgles an inhale that sounds suspiciously like a sob.

23. Rain

Chapter 23: Rain

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Deep Space, on the way back to Moksha. 8 January, 04:06 Standard Time

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Angela sits in the bridge as the *Banshee* streaks through space on a roundabout course back to the rebel base in Moksha. Angela thought ahead when she loaded supplies onto the ship, it has plenty of medical gear and all of the surviving lombaxes are back in suitable physical health. Rusko nearly died, and he spent a few minutes in a coma. After losing one of their members, and the serious trauma they went through, Ratchet and Angela quickly agreed that a short rest was a good idea.

Neither needed to say that they all believed Rusko needed it the most.

Ratchet and Clank are in the cramped bunk room, watching over Rusko. Ratchet and Angela applied bandages and large doses of medical nanotech to Rusko immediately after recovering him in Kasir, but now the medical technology has done its work and what physical wounds Rusko sustained have been repaired.

Clank, with ample help from Ratchet, carefully removes the last bandage. After dressing the Falnarian in the only spare Megacorp jumpsuit, Ratchet draws the blanket up over him. He sits down against the wall opposite the bunk Rusko is in.

“Rusko was always such a strong fighter, he was even better than me. He was always faster, more agile.” Ratchet laughs once. *And he didn’t even rub it in my face.* The Veldinian lombax looks at Rusko and notices the small muscles are twitching, as if he was having a bad dream.

“I wonder what happened to him. I mean, even as badly hit as he was, he should have been able to make it. He was almost as badly hurt when the guards shot him on Mos Llenar, but he kept on going longer than any of us.” Ratchet looks back at Rusko. *What would it take to*

bring down someone so invincible?

Clank scans Rusko again to be sure the other lombax is asleep. "Ratchet, he just learned that his daughter is dead."

Then it hit him like an anvil. Clank slips out of the room and returns to the bridge as Ratchet sits there on the bunk. "Oh, man."

The door slides shut and Ratchet leans closer to Rusko. "I can't imagine what kind of a blow that would be. I never really had any family." The small muscles on Rusko's face are still twitching. "I wonder what sort of nightmares he's having now."

A world of inky blackness surrounds Rusko. Ranaia stands several meters from him, looking forlonly in the direction of her husband, but her eyes turned down. The same vicious razor-wire fence separates them. Rusko stands up and begins a stumbling walk towards her, the tears filling his eyes. He speeds up from a walk to a desperate run, and this time the fence dissolves.

Just before he reaches her, she looks up at him. She turns a gaze to him, neither cold and judging nor pitying, but something with deep empathy. "Rusko."

Rusko collapses against Ranaia. She catches him and holds him against her as he cries. "Ranaia, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

"What is it, love? Where is Miiksha? Where is our little girl?"

Rusko chokes back another sob. "I'm sorry, Ranaia. I couldn't... I..."

Rusko breaks down again and Ranaia tightens her embrace.

Terminated: 11 June 4163.

"How could this be, Rusko?"

Rusko looks up into Ranaia's eyes, dark blue oceans of calm amidst the raging storm. "I know, it feels so... wrong. But it couldn't be a lie, they didn't know we were coming. They couldn't..."

Rusko chokes again and tightens his hold on Ranaia. She reaches up one hand and lightly strokes the fur along the back of his head. "You know what this means, love?"

Rusko looks up at her, their eyes locking again and a strange energy takes hold of both of them, of the very space around them.

"You have to protect her memory, Rusko. Now that it is all that is left, you have to bring justice to her memory."

Ranaia holds Rusko away and stands him up. "You have to avenge her

death.”

Rusko opens his eyes. The bottom of a Megacorp bunk greets him. Rusko shoves the blanket off him and sits up on the bunk. Ratchet stands at the end of the cramped space, looking a little surprised that the Falnarian is awake. Rusko’s cold gaze and almost mechanical certainty sends chills up his spine as the Falnarian asks, “Where’s Clank?”

Ratchet is surprised by how the sudden strength and seriousness of Rusko’s tone, and he doesn’t answer right away. However, his gaze flicks to the door, towards the bridge where Clank was headed. Rusko catches the gesture. With his expression hardened, he stands up and walks to the door before Ratchet can get up and stop him.

The bunkroom and bridge doors slide open for him and Rusko steps into the bridge before Ratchet shouts, “Rusko, we haven’t even reached Moksha yet!”

“We’re not going to Moksha. Clank, you hacked through their database.” Rusko speaks it as a statement, but Clank realizes he is asking for confirmation.

Clank nods. “I had to search nearly every major ‘gulag’ in several sectors before I found Miiksha and Ranaia. They were held on the long-term detention facility in the fourth planet in the Nifleem system.”

Rusko turns to Angela, the look in his eyes making it clear that he is not to be questioned. “Set a course for the Nifleem system.”

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You know how sometimes you’re writing and the story suddenly forces you to deviate from the outline you’ve got planned? That’s what happened here. This chapter just had to be written. I’m sorry it’s so short, but this is good news: a rapid update for you! It was written in an insomnia-induced state (though, strangely, my best work seems to come from such times).

Sarge11: I’m glad that at least the emotion of the scene where Rusko learns of Miiksha’s fate was properly conveyed. I listen to a soundtrack as I write, and the song I looped over and over as I wrote that was named “Tears”.

Just in case you wanted to know, “Nifleem” is derived from Norse

mythology (like many place names in ‘Wormhole’), in this case derived from the place “Niflheim”, a Norse version of hell of eternal winter, blasting blizzards, and blistering ice.

24. Anger

Chapter 24: Anger

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Nifleem System. 8 January, 14:20 Standard Time

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A blue dwarf burns in the center of the Nifleem System. Two scorched, lifeless rocks of wastelands barely enough to be called planets rotate around the dwarf. Beyond the first two orbits a larger flecked with blue, green, and the white of clouds, orbiting at a ninety-degree tilt to the other planets. Beyond that is a relatively large but arctic planet, a bitterly cold world used by the Ta'ree as a giant prison camp.

A flash of light explodes into real-space in close orbit to the fourth planet. A small, winged, almost arrowhead-like ship races at the nearest orbital defense platform. The Ta'ree scramble on sight of the *Banshee*. Pulse-cannons roar and the pods on the ends of the wings open as ion cannons lock onto the orbital weapons platform.

On the bridge, Ratchet flies the *Banshee* in a twisting loop around the platform, keeping the nose pointed at the target. Rusko is still at weapons, a hardened look of fury on his face that a stranger might mistake for calm determination. Angela sits at sensors, watching the screens light up as the Ta'ree scramble to intercept the *Banshee*.

Rusko fires another blast of the ion cannons into the station and the structure cracks wide open, its own powerful systems pushing it apart in an explosion of bright white light. Then the first squadron of star-fighters arrives.

Red laser fire blasts from the noses of the Megacorp-built star-fighters, peppering the tiny warship's shields. The *Banshee* shrugs off the blows, initially regenerating so quickly Ratchet wouldn't even notice the hits were it not from the flashes of the skin-tight fields as they block damage. Ratchet whips the *Banshee* around and activates the nose turret as Rusko unloads the primary pulse-cannons into the fighters. Four blast into space debris immediately and the others scatter in groups of two or three, coming around for another pass.

Ratchet doesn't give them the chance to fully regroup. He aggressively hunts after the nearest group and helps Rusko blast it apart. Another ten star-fighters explode. Then rail-gun fire strikes the *Banshee* and Angela shouts, "Destroyers! I count five of them! There's also two frigates closing in!"

Ratchet pulls a sharp dorsal turn, putting two of the approaching destroyers in Rusko's cross-hairs. Ion cannons blaze and a volley of missiles finish off both of them. Pulse guns finish off a third and collapse the shields on a fourth. Rusko lets loose another volley of missiles, but before he can vaporize the last destroyer, particle accelerator fire from one of the frigates begins zooming into the *Banshee*.

The compact warship shudders and shakes violently under the intense fire. Ratchet pulls the *Banshee* into a wide, sliding turn. As soon as the computer acquires the attacking frigate, Rusko fires a volley of missiles, but the frigate's shields take the impact and it continues to fire all weapons on the lombax ship. Ratchet hits the afterburners and the *Banshee* rockets towards the larger vessel.

Rusko shoots a quick burst of the ion cannons into the frigate. Its shields fail and the power blinks out for a moment as the beams cut gouges in the hull. Ratchet turns away to engage the last harassing destroyer, and Rusko unleashes one of the nanocite torpedoes at the frigate.

Rusko sprays pulse-cannon fire into the destroyer and Ratchet pulls away at the last minute. The Ta'ree ship blows apart in a yellow-orange ball, a chunk of its hull striking the *Banshee*'s shields as the compact warship flies by.

Laser fire sprinkles across the bow of the *Banshee*'s shields, reminding the lombaxes that the battle is far from over. Ratchet whips the ship around and kicks in the afterburners again, thanking the rebels for extending the boost. Rusko sprays pulse-cannon fire at the star-fighters, and Ratchet adds in by activating the fast-track gattling turret hidden under the ship's nose. Another eight star-fighters break apart before accelerator fire from the last frigate distracts Ratchet.

Ratchet whips the warship around and Rusko unleashes a blast from the port ion cannon. The frigate slams all of its engine power to starboard to evade the blast. The maneuver works, but the *Banshee* is faster and more maneuverable than the frigate. Within seconds, Ratchet has the *Banshee* staring at the frigate's broad side. Rusko fires the ion cannons again, plowing deep gouges into the ship. He lets up on the cannons and fires again, this time cracking through to the

engines. Ratchet pulls away just as the frigate begins to blossom into a massive fireball.

The star-fighters dive down towards the cloudy, arctic planet, hoping to lure the lombax ship in weapons range of the orbital platforms. Despite Rusko's furious aggression, Ratchet and Angela are smarter and instead attack the platforms. A combination of the ion cannons and the remaining nanocite torpedoes destroy all six of the remaining defensive stations.

Ratchet dives down into the atmosphere after the last remaining star-fighter and Angela scans the detention camp on the surface below. "It's got a garrison inside, we're going to need to take them out while cracking the perimeter."

Rusko blasts the star-fighter and Ratchet pulls the *Banshee* into level flight just above cloud cover. "I'll take Clank and make a jump into the camp. You and Rusko can handle the bigger targets."

Ratchet transfers pilot controls to Rusko right as a wide, bulbous Ta'ree personnel transport ship rises through the clouds in an attempt to escape. Rusko whips the *Banshee* around and fires the ion cannons into the transport. Its pieces sink back beneath the clouds.

Angela scans the area again. "The ship came from a space port adjacent to the camp. The other ships are powering down, suppress fire."

Ratchet nods and takes Clank. He slaps the robot onto his back like so many times before in Solona and jumps out of the airlock. Rusko takes the *Banshee* into a dive and strafes a series of anti-air batteries as he begins his first bombardment run.

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Gulag, Nifleem System. 8 January, 14:41 Standard Time

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The lower levels of the clouds rush past as Ratchet plummets towards the ground. Icy wind that makes him shudder rushes past and the moisture clinging to his fur crystallizes. The camp opens up beneath him as he descends the last of the clouds. The *Banshee* rushes past, pulse-cannons blazing. Ratchet notices that the defensive fire is all focused at the *Banshee*, leaving him to relatively leisurely aim himself into the Ta'ree quarter. *I wonder why I never thought of trying something like this in the Solona Galaxy.*

Clank activates his propellers and Ratchet's feet quietly touch

down. On gut instinct, he throws himself to the side. A bolt of plasma flies straight through where his head had been a moment before. Ratchet whips around and almost laughs. Shooting at him are a series of the four-legged Megacorp security robots.

Ratchet pulls out his triple-barreled Stelcorp Blaster and strafes right as he squeezes down on the trigger. The security robots fly into scraps. Something drops to the snow-covered ground directly behind him and Ratchet rolls forward.

A long-toothed carbonox chainsaw-arm slashes at him just a second too late. Ratchet unloads the Blaster into the short-ranged MSR. Another rustling drop in the snow behind him alerts Ratchet to another MSR-1. Ratchet reacts instinctively, whipping around and turning the Blaster around in his hands, smashing the butt of the composite alloy across the robot's head, severing the appendage. The body stumbles a moment in disorientation, but rights itself and swings back its chainsaw arm to attack where Ratchet last was.

Ratchet backflips and blasts the robot apart. He hears a nearby door opening and a series of red-and-white robots jog out, guns in both hands. *Oh, wonderful. I hate these stupid trooper 'bots.* Ratchet ducks behind a metal crate and draws his next weapon: a Stelcorp Hydra. *Good enough.* Ratchet hops over the crate with a helpful burst from Clank and unleashes a small volley of six missiles. Each one homes in on a separate trooper, knocking them back. Ratchet pulls the trigger again, sending nine more volleys before the stream of troopers finally ends.

"Ratchet, it appears that there is a control center in that building. If we could get inside, I could shut down the garrison without having to fight through every single one. It would also avoid tripping the breakout containment protocols."

Ratchet turns his head towards Clank. "What do you mean, 'breakout containment protocols'?" The door the Megacorp-built troopers came outside starts to slide closed. "Never mind." Ratchet sprints forward and activates his charge boots. He rockets inside just as the doors close, narrowly missing his tail.

Ratchet stands up and draws his Blaster again. "So, Clank. Where to next?"

"According to my sensors, this building has five above-ground floors. The command center is on the third floor. There don't seem to be any ladders, but there are stairs just ahead and to the left."

Ratchet nods and takes off. After ascending the stairs cutting back

and fourth, ignoring the caution warnings to remain slow, he reaches the third floor. The door won't open. The sound of at least a dozen troopers marching up the steps below him don't add any positive feeling to the situation.

"Ratchet, my sensors indicate the third floor is in a partial lockdown. There is a utility ladder, but it has been blocked off from the first basement floor up to level four. Basement two and level five may still be open."

Ratchet whips out his Nitro Erupter and sends it into the approaching column, destroying six of the troopers. It looks like an endless column march up to take their place. "Fifth floor sounds good to me." Ratchet breaks into a sprint.

He almost runs into a hulking robot guard. It brings up its arm-mounted plasma gun, but Ratchet fires first. His Nitro Erupter blasts it into pieces, also knocking Ratchet back into the approaching column of robot troops.

They immediately start unloading fire into him, a few firing so eagerly that their aim strikes other troopers instead of Ratchet. Thinking quickly, Ratchet drops his Erupter and draws his whip. A few quick swings back and fourth bring down at least ten troopers, giving Ratchet room to jump up and run over the debris on the way to the fifth floor.

More shots chip at the wall next to him and Ratchet draws his N90. He whips around and continues to run backwards up the stairs as he unloads into the troopers, knocking them into pieces as the seemingly endless column continues running up after him. Finally, the stairs end and Ratchet backs out through the door and continues to fire until it slides shut.

Ratchet pants and takes a short pause to breathe. Then the stair door opens again. Ratchet holds up his N90 and sprays fire into the door, blasting apart several troopers. Just as he thinks the troopers are starting to thin, his gun clicks.

With no time, Ratchet drops his gun and reaches back for his Erupter. Unfortunately, that still lies on the stairwell, dropped in the middle of scattered debris. Ratchet jumps, leaping into a backflip, assisted by a burst from Clank. He kicks off the wall and draws his Omniwrench, bringing it crashing down on the first trooper to step out the door, and knocking the robotic soldier back into the others.

As his feet hit the floor, Ratchet draws his liquid nitrogen gun. Ratchet crushes his finger over the trigger and sprays at the Megacorp

troopers. The machines quickly freeze under the Gagetron weapon's spray. Once a decent wall of frozen machines blocks the door, Ratchet hits the 'close' button and takes out his N90 to reload it with a spare clip. "Clank? Next time, we're taking the elevator."

Clank is about to shout in warning when suddenly a gun clubs Ratchet across the side of the head. Spots burst into his vision and he whips around, returning with a hard blow of his own with his N90. The trooper almost goes off-balance and Ratchet swings again, breaking through the trooper's chest armor and cracking its power core. The machine falls back and collapses in a heap on the floor. Ratchet holds up his gun and pulls the trigger.

The gun, damaged from its unusual use in melee combat, instead backfires, sending a strong shock into Ratchet. Ratchet shouts in surprise and drops it. "Damn it! That was my favorite gun!"

"Um... Ratchet. Look around."

Ratchet looks up and notices even before his eyes leave the floor that this floor is far different from the spartan functionality others. The floor is covered by a thick carpet in a mild tone of brown. The hallway is tall and spacious, the walls a similar brown to the carpet. The high ceiling is painted a pale blue that Ratchet assumes the sky might look like if it wasn't completely overcast and snowing outside. The hallway to his left ends almost immediately, it stretches a short distance to his right.

Ratchet turns and notices a tall set of double doors that look like they have wood paneling. He steps forward and, with no other way to get to the opposite end of the building, he opens them. Stretching out ahead of him is a huge room even taller and more spacious than the hallway. Huge, double-paned windows stretch from floor to ceiling. Large potted plants dot the room.

A Ta'ree guard with lieutenant stripes on his shoulders stands at one of the windows, looking out at the winterscape. A tower in the distance bursts, sending concrete flying, as three of the *Banshee's* missiles strike the reinforced structure. The guard senses Ratchet's entrance and turns around posthaste. "*Lombani!*"

He draws a Blaster and Ratchet does the same. Both squeeze down the trigger and begin strafing towards cover and laser fire fills the room.

25. Shattered Glass

Chapter 25: Shattered Glass

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Gulag, Nifleem System. 8 January, 15:22 Standard Time

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Rusko pulls the *Banshee* into a steep climb and shuts off the engines. Just before the tiny warship begins to fall again, he taps the thrusters, turning the ship's nose down. He kicks the impulse-thrusters into high-power and rockets the Megacorp ship past a seeking missile volley and heading at the last SAM sites on the western edge of the sprawling prison camp. Purple-blue phased energy chews up the ground as Rusko unleashes pulse-cannon fire down at the defenses, quickly blasting apart the first cluster. Missiles take out the other one, and Rusko turns to the next Ta'ree targets: the wall towers.

Most of the towers are manned, and some even crewed by Ta'ree brave enough to fire on the *Banshee*. Unfortunately for them, Rusko is still out for blood. The nearest tower is a flimsy construction of steel. Rusko punches the afterburners and uses the *Banshee*'s bulk itself to tear through the midsection of the nearest tower.

No further fire draws his attention, and he strains to find more Ta'ree to destroy. As he spreads his attention, he becomes aware of another voice inside the narrow bridge.

"Rusko, set us down."

It takes a moment for the haze to begin to clear and for him to recognize the voice as belonging to Angela, and by the tone she had asked him before . . . was this the second time she asked? The third? It couldn't have been too many, or she would either sound more desperate or more angry. The Falnarian turns in his swivel chair to notice Angela, sitting at sensors, with a communications warning blinking at one of her screens.

"Clank's sending a distress signal, Ratchet's in trouble. All the signal says is that Ratchet ran into a guard stronger than him, and Ratchet needs backup before he runs out of ammo."

Rusko nods. He turns the ship back towards the core of the massive gulag and kicks in the afterburners, flying just beneath the clouds. As he nears a five-story tower, he notices the flashes of various gunfire coming from a large observation room at the top. Rusko sets the *Banshee* down in one of the wide intersections next to the tower. Angela rushes out of the airlock, drawing her grapple gun on the way out. Rusko locks up the ship before the sound of smashing plate glass above grabs his attention.

Ratchet goes sailing out of the window, tumbling through the air until striking a snow bank. Rusko aims his grapple and leaps up to enter through the tall window. Angela rushes to Ratchet's side, tripping once on an object hidden beneath the snow. "Ratchet! Are you okay?"

A sputtering cough reaches out from a lombax-shaped hole in the snow bank. The hole starts to collapse as Ratchet crawls out of the snow bank, flakes clinging to the fur on his ears and face. He pops up above the snow and falls over the same object Angela tripped over, knocking both of them to the ground. Angela gets up first, then holds out her hand and he takes the assistance, a smile finally breaking over his face. "I'll be fine. Let's finish off that guard."

The radio on Ratchet's and Angela's helmets clicks on and Rusko shouts from the other side over Blaster fire and the sound of breaking stone and ceramic, "He's an *entar migath*, no wonder Ratchet couldn't handle him! He's got a pulse-emitter on his right hand." A particularly loud sound of exploding ceramic fills the speakers. "If it's not too much to ask, I could use some help up here!"

Ratchet and Angela scramble up through the building, this time not having to fight through hordes of troopers with the exception of smashing through the wall of frozen ones on the top floor. They burst into the cavernous observation break room in time to see an impressive display of Rusko's agility as he does a backflip over the Ta'ree.

Nollin rams the butt of his gun back and smashes it square against Rusko's forehead, contacting the Teslatanium helmet. Rusko stumbles back and both hold out their weapons. A click sounds simultaneously from both. Nollin smirks. "You're empty, monkey."

"So are you, Ren'ta'hee."

The guard smirks. "I still have other weapons. You don't."

Now Rusko smirks. "You'll learn we lombaxes have plenty of surprises." He tosses his empty blaster to the side and flicks his wrists,

holding his hands open and fingers curled. Curved, wickedly-sharp carbonox claws slide out of the hidden sheathes built into the fingers. He jumps forward and slashes Nollin, catching him by surprise with the bestial attack. The extended claws slice across the Ta'ree's face and neck, leaving bleeding gashes.

Nollin roars and stumbles back. He glares murder at Rusko and thrusts out his right hand as his other reaches behind for another weapon.

A pulse of pure force rushes from the hand device like a runaway freight train, bashing into Rusko and smashing him through another window.

The Ta'ree turns back around, momentarily surveying the room. It started out dotted by decorative ceramic containers holding potted plants, but now nearly every one is shattered, their contents of soil and plant spilled out across the polished floor. He spots Ratchet and Angela crouching down into ready, defensive positions.

Ratchet draws his trusty Omniwrench 8000. Angela reaches behind her back and draws her upgraded plasma sword, a dual-bladed weapon that reminds Ratchet of the double-bladed swords Nefarious' robo-ninjas used. With a flick of the wrist, she turns it on and an aura of dark yellow plasma rushes out onto the blades.

Nollin smiles and also crouches, drawing a pair of single-bladed plasma swords from his belt. "Finally, things are starting to get interesting." He flicks them on and chooses an opening posture.

Ratchet bursts into a sprint, running around the guard to hit him on his right. Angela cartwheels to the guard's other side and swings her double-bladed sword a moment after Ratchet swings his wrench.

Nollin smasks aside Ratchet's wrench, following up immediately with a kick straight to Ratchet's throat as Cross nears. The blow knocks Ratchet two meters away, leaving him coughing on the floor.

With his other sword, he deflects Angela's low first swipe. She leans forward and continues the momentum, bringing her other blade around. Nollin turns fully to Angela and smashes his sword into her incoming blade. Angela jumps and swings her sword vertically, trying a downward slice. Nollin bats her sword away and swings at her midsection.

She blocks his blow and steps forward, twisting as she swings her double-sword in again. He tries to push her blade away, but Angela has been well trained and she spins around, almost cutting through his

rib cage. Nollin forces Cross to pause by kicking her in the knee, then kicking her in the stomach.

The Ta'ree guard whips around and swings high with his sword, deflecting most of the blow of Ratchet's hyper-strike, grunting with the effort. His wrench blocked, Ratchet kicks hard, catching Nollin's chin. A loud 'crack' sounds as his jaws smash together, and the blow sends him reeling back.

Nollin pushes away Angela's swing as he recovers from Ratchet's kick, a trickle of blood running from his mouth. Angela swings low, high, feints left and thrusts right. The *migath* guard fends off her rapid blows, knocks Ratchet back, and kicks Cross firmly in the gut. She stumbles back, gasping.

Ratchet jumps behind Nollin and swings hard. His wrench smashes into Nollin's armored side right at the base of the rib cage, but the blow still goes through. The guard coughs, then snarls.

Nollin flips the sword in his right hand, then plunges it backwards, surprising Ratchet. The sword strikes his Aegis armor and cuts a smoking gouge into the chest plate and knocks Ratchet down.

Nollin turns to Cross, already coming back at him. Unfortunately, she is out of swinging range. Nollin impales his right sword into the ground and holds out his pulse-emitter. What surprises Ratchet isn't the wave of raw force that explodes at Angela...

...it's the fact that she counters by sending a duplicate wave of force at the Ta'ree simultaneously with a hand device she stole earlier. The pulses pass through each other and both Cross and Nollin go flying.

Angela smashes into the granite paneling of the wall, cracking a tall depression into the stone. The Ta'ree sails through the air and hits a pile of broken ceramic and dirt, sliding for a second before coming to a complete stop. Everything is still as the shock passes through everyone.

The moment of quiet lasts about half a second. Nollin sheathes his sword and jumps to his feet, drawing a "Ricochet" gun, Stelcorp's version of Megacorp's Disk Blade gun. He fires twice at Ratchet, sending sharp spinning blades of death at the injured lombax. The blast of the first knocks him back, and the second only narrowly misses him, almost sending him back out the window, but he manages to catch the ledge.

Cross is all over him before he's prepared. Her first swing slices a

deep gash through his right forearm, the next goes through his thigh. Nollin drops his Ricochet glove launcher and draws his sword, roaring as he takes to the offensive, using his superior strength to push the Bogon lombax back.

Their swords cross and Cross pushes back with all of her strength, only slowing Nollin's advance when blood splatters onto her arm and Nollin collapses to the floor, hole from a sniper's bullet through his head.

Rusko's voice clicks on over the helmet radios. "Is that it? Did I get him?"

Angela walks to the shattered-out window Ratchet hangs from and helps him up. "Yeah, Rusko. You got him." She looks down at the snowy road on the south side of the tower to see a figure holding the sniper rifle she dropped when she tripped in the snow. He flips to one side and a bolt of plasma narrowly misses him. Rusko extends his claws and kick-swings.

Megacorp security robots pour out of several of the buildings, and despite their individual weakness, their numbers quickly surround him. Ratchet grabs Angela's arm to get her moving, "C'mon!" He runs to the second tall set of doors and opens them. A short ways down the hallway is a well-hidden door concealing the ladder access Ratchet was looking for.

26. Liberation

Chapter 26: Liberation

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Gulag, Nifleem System. 9 January, 06:08 Standard Time

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The yawning maw of the gates to Camp C rise up in front of the small troop. The structure is intimidating, rising eight meters straight up with razor wire covering both sides in a deadly lace. As Clank promised, both of the massive double-gates are open. Rusko and Angela stop a few meters from the outer gate and wait for Clank to catch up for the fourth time in ten minutes. The short but determined robot realizes he is slowing down the others. His sensors also won't be able to help pick out Ranaia, and his diminutive stature will make a visual search impractical.

Coming to a decision, Clank stops behind on the road. "Miss Cross? Since my skills of hacking are no longer needed, I feel I would be better useful on the *Banshee* with Ratchet. Would either of you two mind—"

Rusko interrupts as he turns back towards the gate, throwing over his shoulder, "Do what you want." The Falnarian makes a small, tentative step towards the gate, but stops.

Clank's antenna extends and a transmitter pops open from the top of his head as he sends a signal to Ratchet in the *Banshee*. No more than a few seconds later, a rumble grows as the compact warship approaches through the breaking cloud-cover. The compact warship lands on the wide road behind them, the wash from the thrusters sending hot air whipping about as it touches down. The airlock opens and the ramp slides down.

Ratchet pokes his head outside and rubs the back of his neck nervously. "Say, guys, I was just wondering. Since there's really no more Ta'ree to worry about, could I join you down here?"

Angela looks at Rusko, who responds with a non-comital shrug of the shoulders, avoiding looking at the gate. She turns back to Ratchet. "Sure, we could use the help. According to Clank, Camp C is pretty

big.”

Ratchet nods and hops down. Clank runs up the ramp, stating, “I will take the ship and maintain air cover,” before he enters. The ramp retracts and the airlock seals as the *Banshee*’s impulse thrusters push it back into the air. The compact warship speeds off under the clouds to continue its patrol over the sprawling gulag as Ratchet jogs next to Angela.

Ratchet and Angela glance at Rusko. He hasn’t made another step towards Camp C. Angela asks, “Rusko? Let’s get going.”

The Falnarian lombax takes one step forward, then steps back and turns away, tears building up in his eyes. “I can’t do it.”

Ratchet’s ears twitch to knock off some of the snow collecting. “Why not?”

Rusko clenches his hands into fists. “What would I say...? How could I explain...?” He drops to his knees. “Oh, God, Miiksha!”

Angela shouts to try to get through to the despairing lombax. “Get ahold of yourself! We’re here now, and Ranaia’s alive in there. Let’s start with finding your wife.”

Rusko finally manages a nod at Angela’s simple directness and the three turn back to the yawning gates covered with razor-wire.

A small crowd of lombaxes mill around the open gates. From the smell, they haven’t had a decent bath in a long time. By their haggard, gaunt looks, they also haven’t had enough sleep or a proper meal in what must be years. What disturbs Ratchet the most, even more than the sickly thin-ness, is the confused look in their eyes.

These lombaxes lived in the camps for so long that they gave up hope. They lived without hope for so long, now that the prospect of freedom has returned, none of them know what to do.

The three spread out a little as they proceed down the central road into the camp, Rusko on the right, Angela in the middle, and Ratchet on the left. Many of the lombax prisoners are in such a daze that they bump into the incoming troop as they walk, then continue on without even realizing that they are there. Ratchet glances at the huts on the right and left. All of them look exactly the same, as if they had been stamped out of the same mass-production factory. He looks to his left to take a closer look. The modest barracks “huts” are made primarily of metal, painted a gloomy gray. An image is scratched into the corner of one of the huts: a lombax face peeking over the bottom edge of the hut, accompanied by the message “Killroy lives.”

As they walk, Angela notices Rusko's expression change. While his features seemed to have depression permanently etched into them, the sort of helpless sadness curling his ears and drooping his tail now is different than the gloom of being apart from his family. His eyes sweep over the orange-clad lombaxes wandering in the camp.

"Rusko? What's wrong?"

Rusko jerks around to look at Angela, surprised by being pulled out of his state. "I... it's just that... all these years, I knew about these camps. But all I ever thought about was my family. All these people..." He gestures to the lombaxes wandering ahead of them, "...I never..."

Angela walks closer and puts a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "And now you've freed both, Rusko. C'mon. Ranaia's waiting."

Rusko shakes off Angela's hand, though she notes that the droop to his ears and the plodding of his pace lessens ever so slightly. She returns to the middle of the road and the three resume their northwards trek.

Huts continue to pass by, and the dozens of lombaxes they pass through turn into hundreds. Ratchet looks over the road and glances down the space between the barracks huts each time he passes one, but he doesn't see any lombax that completely matches the file photo of Ranaia. He walks closer to Angela and mutters, "I don't see..."

He ceases speaking when Angela stops moving, then follows her gaze when she says, "It's her."

Ratchet can't stop his eyes from roving up and down the attractive lombax female at least once, nor does he seem to be able to stop himself from whistling. Angela promptly slaps him upside the back of the head and shoots a glare at the Veldinian. Ratchet sheepishly averts his eyes and mutters something that sounds like "sorry."

Angela turns around and waves the last member closer, "Rusko!"

The woman's expression, which was only slightly less downtrodden than the other lombaxes, instantaneously perks at the sound of that name. Her ears shoot up and her eyes widen, the a shocked smile erasing the frown from her face.

Rusko jogs closer, and his expression rapidly changes. His face brightens, his ears snap up, and the first smile that Angela ever saw on his normally bleak visage finally begins to crack across Rusko's face. He begins to run closer, "Ranaia!"

Ranaia also starts to run to Rusko, but suddenly a blur of orange and tan fur sprints past her, rocketing at Rusko.

“Daddy!”

Rusko reflexively catches her in midair and swings her in the air as a full smile widens across his face. “Miiksha!”

Rusko laughs and pulls her into a crushing hug, tears overflowing his eyes. “Miiksha, I thought...” Rusko cuts himself off and relaxes his hold on the eight-year-old just as she starts to squirm. He gently sets Miiksha down, then is caught by surprise when Ranaia spins him around to face her and captures his lips with her own in a deep kiss. Rusko melts into the embrace.

Ratchet and Angela both avert their eyes, somehow feeling as if they are intruding, watching in on something they shouldn’t be. Neither of them wants to interrupt the reunion of a husband and wife separated for years.

Fortunately, an impatient eight-year-old doesn’t have that constraint.

“Eeeewww! Mom! Dad!” Miiksha sticks out her tongue in childish revulsion and makes a face. Ratchet and Angela both start laughing and have to use every ounce of self-control to try to bring the laughter back under control.

The two reluctantly pull apart. Rusko looks to Angela, leaving one arm looped around the small of Ranaia’s back. “What now, Cross?”

“To start with I guess we should get back to the ship. There was a spaceport connected to the gulag, we’ll see what we can do for the other prisoners, but we can’t even fit more than six people in the *Banshee*, and that’s if we crush everyone in together with most standing.”

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Gulag, Nifleem System. 9 January, 09:12 Standard Time

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“...That’s all we can fit on this transport, and there’s no more cargo or equipment we can remove.” The voice crackles over Angela’s helmet radio.

“Understood. Close up, lift off whenever you’re ready. I’ll contact Clank.” She taps the controls on her forearm, switching the channel to the *Banshee*. “Angela to Clank, the freighter *Kodiak* is ready for lift off.

Would you rather escort them to a warp point in orbit, or would you rather do another pass over the gulag to make sure we haven't left anyone behind? I'm gonna go get Ratchet and Rusko."

"Since the evacuation is still in progress, and the *Banshee* has rather poor life-sensors, I will escort the vessel out of the atmosphere. I will be able to check for incoming Ta'ree forces. Miiksha, those are the weapons controls. Please do not touch—"

High in the clearing skies above, a bolt from a pulse-cannon flashes through the sky. Angela smiles and begins jogging out of the armory and back to the gate between the gulag and spaceport, where Ratchet and Rusko were standing guard and overseeing the evacuation of the prisoners.

The steady stream of prisoners have reduced to a steady trickle. Many of them make way for Angela, a sense of awe coming over them, and she hears them whispering after her. One of the words she picks up is 'hero.' Angela blushes in modesty under her fur. *Hero? I didn't really do anything. This isn't even my galaxy.* She opens a new comm. channel, "Angela to Ratchet, do you copy?"

"Ratchet here. It looks like the last of the prisoners are coming through. We'll have enough ships to take care of the last of them. One thing, all of the Ta'ree in the port seemed to disappear after the prisoners came through." Angela shudders at the probable fate of Ta'ree found by the lombax prisoners. Of course, can she really blame the captives for a moment of vengeance?

"It looks like we've done all we can here. See you in a few." Angela cuts the transmission and jogs through the rest of the base to the fortified gates connecting the spaceport to the Ta'ree section of the gulag.

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Gulag, Nifleem System. 9 January, 13:00 Standard Time

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As Angela Cross makes her way to the spaceport gate, the skies darken and the clouds come back together. Snow begins to fall again right as she reaches the massive gates. Ratchet waves in greeting, then rubs his arms against the cold. "What's wrong, Ratchet? This isn't even as bad as Grelbin."

Ratchet breathes into his clasped hands, trying to warm his fingers, before responding. "It's still colder than Kyzil Plateau."

Angela snickers and leans against a section of metal gate support not covered by razor-wire. A brief chill seeps through the chinks in her armor and she suppresses a shiver. *Okay, so it is colder here than Grelbin.*

Rusko, followed by Ranaia, joins Ratchet and Angela on the southern end of the gate. Another transport lifts off in the distance of the spaceport. Rusko stops and breathes, his breath creating a fog that floats up and out in the starting snow, reminding Ratchet of the space station where he learned about the Ta'ree.

"I've been thinking about where we should go next. Obviously we can't stay in Falnar. I'm a Shadow Commando of the Kel'no'reem, and I don't want to put Ranaia or Miiksha in danger again." Rusko pauses and looks to Angela. "You are a chief in Megacorp, in Bogon, do you know if you could do anything?"

She shakes her head. "I'm afraid not." Ratchet and Rusko send questioning looks at her silently asking why. Angela sighs and elaborates. "I only have so much authority. I didn't exactly have authorization to take the *Banshee* into Falnar and break prisoners out of a Ta'ree gulag. I'm going to be in hot water myself, I was trying to figure out what *I* was going to do."

She stairs at the ground between her feet as if it was the most interesting thing in the camp avoiding the looks sent at her by the others. Oh look! A snow beetle! No, wait, that's just a pebble.

Ratchet blurts without thinking first, "You can come stay with me." Angela doesn't look up and Ratchet adds, 'C'mon, you've earned a vacation, and Kyzil Plateau's really cleaned up since the attack by the Tyrranoids.' He looks at Rusko and Ranaia to include them in his offer. "You can come and stay until you decide where to go."

Rusko looks to Ranaia and she shrugs, making a slightly affirmative grunt. He looks back to Ratchet. "Thanks. I think we'll do that."

The speakers click in the headphones of everyone in the group with a helmet, and Clank speaks. "The last refugee ship is away. I am returning to the spaceport. You should see the *Banshee* descending beneath the cloud cover now."

Ratchet, Angela, and Rusko look up at the sky above the spaceport, but the snow has become so thick that they can't see anything. A few tense seconds pass before they hear the rumbling of the *Banshee's* impulse thrusters as it descends, touching down conveniently close to the gate. All four of the cold lombaxes pile into the compact warship. Angela hits the 'close' button at the airlock and they head into the

bridge.

Miiksha bounds at Rusko, clamping her arms around her neck. “Yay! You’re back! Clank was boring, he wouldn’t let me do anything.”

Rusko chuckles and sets the little girl down. “I guess we’re off to Solona?”

The others nod and Clank begins to set a course as the ship enters the stratosphere. “Should we check in with the resistance first?”

Rusko glances sheepishly at the others, embarrassed at having forgotten such an important thing as he mutters, “Yeah, probably.”

“Very well, Moksha first. Then Solona it is.”

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“Angela to Clank, the freighter *Kodiak* is ready for lift off.”

Just a little homage to one of my favorite games, Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun. The “Kodiak” is GDI’s flying command ship, though, not a freighter.

27. Epilogue: Salvation

Epilogue: Chapter 27: Salvation

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Deep Space on the way to the Moksha System. 10 January, 06:57
Standard Time

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Stars streak past as the Banshee journeys the last leg of its trip to Moksha. Angela sits at the pilots seat, watching over the ship as they complete the last leg of the journey to the Kel’no’reem base. Ratchet and Clank are in the engine room, Rusko and Ranaia asleep on the warship’s two bunks.

The narrow doors to the bridge slides open and the little eight-year-old strolls in. She tugs on Angela’s sleeve to get her attention, looking up at her with large, curious eyes. “Miss Angela?”

The Megacorp security chief sits up in her chair. “My name is Angela Cross. Just call me Angela.”

Miiksha tilts her head and looks curiously at the older lombax. “So... your family name is Angela?”

“What? No, Cross is. My friends and close associates call me Angela. Rusko’s a close associate, and you would be too, I suppose, so I guess you could call me Angela. Besides, that’s simpler than ‘miss Cross’.”

“Okay.” Miiksha pokes at a dark diagnostic screen to one side, then grows bored and turns back to Cross. “Ratchet calls you Angela. Which is he?”

Angela ruffles the fur on the top of Miiksha’s head as she thinks, and the child bats the hand away. “We’ve been through a lot together, so we’re pretty close friends.” She turns to look back over navigation, then remembers a question she had been avoiding asking Ranaia. “Miiksha, the computer records said that you died in a prison riot the day you arrived. How did you make it?”

“Some Kel’no’reem were trying to escape, and they started a riot to

break-out, but the guards in the towers shot all of the rioters. I was caught in the middle, but none of the bullets hit me. Ta'ree don't like handling dead bodies themselves, so they made the prisoners clean up. Mom got me and made me hide in the camp so the Ta'ree couldn't find me and take me away to another prison where they keep kids."

Angela nods, a look of understanding dawning over her face in wonder at the Ta'ree. *They're worse than I thought.* An awkward silence stretches and the security chief notices her pulsing headache start to grow.

"So . . . this is almost over? After all this, we leave?" Cross nods and rubs the bridge of her nose, willing her strange headache to go away. Miiksha stands back on her heels. "Ratchet said he's worried about you, he hoped you'd visit him."

"Oh *did* he now?" She chuckles. Stars fly past the view screen and the girl stands there, waiting for her to say something, so the older lombax says the first thing that comes to mind. "Your mother doesn't seem to like me. Why is that?"

Miiksha shrugs nonchalantly. "She always acts territorial when dad's around other women."

Cross openly stares.

Miiksha stomps her foot and balls her hands into fists. "Just because I'm little doesn't mean I'm stupid!"

Cross raises her hands in mock surrender. "I never said you were." *She sure knows a lot for her age.*

Miiksha crosses her arms, and as if to prove that she's not an infant she continues, "Even kids can smell the pheromones. Like when y—"

"Okay, next subject." Thankfully for the embattled security chief, the *Banshee* drops out of warp and rushes at the Moksha asteroid field. She brings the compact Megacorp warship to a full stop and watches the irregular movements of the vast field. "I'd better get Ratchet."

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Moksha System. 10 December, 09:03 Standard Time

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The last of the major asteroids hurtles past and the second planet fills the view screen as Ratchet pilots the ship into the atmosphere. Cloud cover briefly obscures visual until they drop low enough to see .

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“Fireworks?”

A group of five Megacorp Mantas soar in delta formation over the lightly snow-covered field, and another round of fireworks shoot off, exploding in a dazzling array of colors. The formation turns and breaks in their aerial acrobatics as the Veldinian swings the *Banshee* around, dropping the pocket warship down towards the hangar.

The massive outer doors of the hangar lock together with a reverberating thud like normal, but before the ship's ramp can fully extend, the inner hangar doors open and Kanna enters, flanked by two other lombaxes in regular uniforms. Angela is the first to exit the *Banshee*, followed closely by the others. The Kel'no'reem colonel is the first one to greet them, which surprises everyone.

“Sergeant Rusko! Everyone, we're so glad that you're here. General Aginah is waiting for you. Come on!” She turns around and the two lombaxes wearing lieutenant chevrons wait for the crew to pass before following. Kanna takes the short, familiar route to the briefing room.

As soon as Cross enters, she notices that the wall usually dominated by a huge association matrix and Ta'ree unit chart has been retracted. A filled auditorium lies beyond where it once was. On the opposite side of the built-in long briefing table is the screen-wall showing the fireworks and Manta acrobatics.

At the far end of the table sits a tan-furred lombax, his stripes only a few shades darker than the surrounding fur. A splotch of snow-white fur passes across his face like a half-mask, completely encircling his right eye and stretching over his nose and mouth before passing down the front of his throat and disappearing into his uniform. He stands up, tall and proud, but with the weariness of a pained commander showing through his guarded expression.

Kanna rushes into the room and introduces them. “General Aginah, these are the lombaxes I told you about. Technical Sergeant Aráto, um . . . Ratchet, and Megacorp Security Chief Cross.” Rusko bows lightly at his name and approaches, and the other two follow suit.

General Aginah nods his head in acknowledgement and waits until Rusko reaches approximately arm reach before motioning to one of the lieutenants who followed the crew in. He opens the first box and hands a circle-enclosed five-pointed star on a green-and-white ribbon, which the General takes and hands it to Rusko. “For your service in the face of insurmountable danger, I present the Silver Star of Merit.”

The lieutenant hands a medal shaped like a blue shield ringed by wheat, on a white ribbon. “Though you are not a formal member of

our military, neither are most of our Kel'no'reem. To Ratchet I present the Dragon Slayer award."

Cross stands last, in shock at the entire proceeding. She was expecting to drop off for a quick debriefing like last time, and though she had to stand in front of a group of people to present her thesis, she hasn't ever been a central person in any award ceremony. Ratchet, as subtly as he can, grabs her by the elbow and leads her forward for her portion.

Aginah takes the green ribbon of the last medal. "Miss Cross, you left behind a comfortable job serving order in another galaxy, you brought us a warship intended for the Ta'ree, you withstood days in the most nefarious prison in Tak'sen, and you were instrumental in the complete break-out of the largest gulag in the archipelago. You have been the salvation to untold thousands. It is hardly honor enough to give you the Iron Cross of Valor."

The crowd explodes into their last and loudest round of applause. Even Kanna claps her hands together. Cross tries to back up, "No, I couldn't, even Clank—"

The little robot shakes his head and cuts her off. "I have had my time in the limelight, chief Cross. You have given and suffered the most of all of us. I asked not to be awarded . . ." *because I ran away and couldn't save you three on Alfheim.* "This day is for you," he finishes, gesturing to the three.

The deep green ribbon throws over her head and Ratchet jerks her back towards the crowd. "C'mon, don't leave me hanging. Now wave or I'll grab your arm and wave for you." The slightly shorter lombax doesn't wait and makes good on his threat until Angela pulls away and waves on her own, a smile slowly breaking out.

Ratchet leans closer and whispers, "So, what d'ya say after this we beat this popsicle stand and get some well-deserved R and R in Solona?"

Angela allows her smile to widen a little. "I could use a vacation."